I and the Other(s):
Contemporary Life-writing and the Exilic Imaginary

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by Elizabeth Kollmann

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Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Bronfen (main advisor)
Prof. Dr. Therese Steffen (advisor)

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Introduction

> Any classification you read provokes a desire in you to put yourself into it somewhere: where is your place? At first you think you have found it; but gradually [...] its shape blurs and fades [...] you are no longer classifiable [...]
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> —Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*

We are living in a (late) postmodernist world which questions the idea of individual truth, a world which sees the subject as fluid, as always-in-the-making, and as characterised by fragmentation, alienation and loss. We are living, that is, in a world which has all but shaken the humanist idea of the subject as a stable and autonomous entity. By dint of its very nature, *auto*biography—or writing about the self—is willy-nilly tied up with the concept of subjectivity and with the permutations it has undergone in modernity. There is then also an analogy to be made between changes in assumptions about the subject on the one hand and about autobiography writing on the other. For where autobiography, much like the self, used to be about coherence and belonging, and where it used to be about revealing the truth, it has now become the genre of *not* belonging, of *not* being whole, and of *not* knowing the truth.

This thesis comprises a selection of contemporary life narratives that reveal the postmodern condition of the subject as well as that of the autobiographical genre to be marked by dispossession and uncertainty. As such, I argue that the aforementioned states of not-belonging and not-knowing do not merely coexist in these texts but that they mutually reinforce each other. More precisely, I posit that because of the fluidity of the genre, autobiographical works are free to move between literary worlds at will. This vacillation, in turn, has three distinct but interrelated effects, of which foregrounding the fundamentally exilic nature of the autobiographical genre is foremost. At the same time, oscillating between different domains reflects (and thus redoubles) the subject's sense of being in limbo, thus underlining his or her displacement and unease. Finally, as readers feel dislocated when confronted with a text which, by virtue of its moving around, is not unequivocally classifiable in the literary canon, I claim that a third instance of displacement is created, thereby providing the final point in the subject-text-reader triad of not-belonging and not-knowing.

The works that have been selected to argue the prevalence of homelessness in contemporary autobiography writing include literary critic Allon White's autobiographical fragment *Too Close to the Bone* (1989), Anne Michaels's award-winning fictional memoir *Fugitive Pieces* (1996), Frank McCourt's polemically disputed life narrative *Angela's Ashes* (1996), the second installment in J.M. Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy, *Youth* (2002), and Doris Lessing's auto/biographical experiment *Alfred & Emily* (2008). Before I get to

discussing these texts, however, I will first lay the groundwork in order to claim, in ensuing chapters, that the dislocation *of* and the dislocation *in* the narratives are not only related but reciprocal in their effects. With this in mind, I will shortly turn to the theory of life narratives and trace the way in which opinion has shifted from seeing autobiography as a genre of belonging to one of instability and uncertainty. I will subsequently move on to sketch the displaced state of the contemporary subject and look at the consequences of superimposing an alienating text on an alienated self. For only then will we be in a position to see how autobiography might collaborate with exile in order to reinforce the text's state of not-belonging; only then will we be able to understand how writers might appropriate the exilic properties of the autobiographical genre to convey their innermost sense of dislocation; and only then will we realise how the synthesis of story and subject might generate affect and draw readers in, whether they will or no.

Autobiography theory—then and now

In *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson provide a comprehensive overview of the main developments in the field of autobiography theory. To this end, they invoke William C. Spengemann's *Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (1980), in which the author identifies the period roughly spanning the end of the nineteenth/beginning of the twentieth century as the start of autobiography theory proper. According to Smith and Watson, the two most prominent autobiography critics during this period were German scholars Georg Misch and his father-in-law, Wilhelm Dilthey. Not only were Misch and Dilthey related by marriage but they also had the same idea about the significance of autobiography writing, for both expressed a greater interest in the lives that were being portrayed in these texts than in exploring notions of the self. Thus, while Dilthey believed autobiography to be *the* form of writing that could help modern man comprehend the mysteries of life, and hence to be instructive in the recording of the past, Misch was concerned with how the life narratives of major figures in the West reflected not only the history but also the cultural achievements of that world (193-198).

In contrast to Misch and Dilthey, and hence to the idea that autobiography should be a true and factual account of a person's life, the second important period in autobiography theory was marked by a strong focus on the subject, as well as by a tendency to question autobiography's ability to tell the truth. Though opinions are divided, this phase is often thought to have started with French philosopher Georges Gusdorf's essay "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" published in 1956. In the introduction to *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*—a seminal collection of essays on autobiography edited by James Olney and published in 1980—Olney for one argues that although a few texts on autobiography theory had been written prior to 1956, it was really Gusdorf's essay that marked the beginning of "a theoretical and critical literature about autobiography" ("Autobiography and the Cultural Movement" 7). In line with Olney's

contention that the type of philosophical and literary issues which would be of interest to autobiography critics for the next couple of decades were only raised with "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (9), an examination of Gusdorf's paper then also reveals a shift in focus from *bios* to *autos*; this not only because it claims life narratives are a way of examining the self, but also because it calls into question the nature of autobiographical truth (Gusdorf 27-48).

From its initial focus on the lives of influential men, a change then takes place in autobiography theory in the second half of the twentieth century so that "Language about the 'self' gives way to a preoccupation with 'subjectivity'; concerns with textual truth are replaced with explorations of creative self-construction" (Woods 351). Smith and Watson sum up the differences between the two periods as follows:

> First-wave critics, preoccupied with the *bios* of the autobiographer, understood autobiography as a subcategory of the biography of great lives and acted as moralists of sorts, evaluating the quality of the life lived and the narrator's telling of that truth [...] In contrast, second-wave critics brought new understandings of the key concepts of self and truth [...] Radical challenges to the notion of a unified selfhood in the early decades of the twentieth century eroded certainty in both a coherent "self" and the "truth" of self narrating [...] Critics shifted from the concept of a universal "self"—achieving self-discovery, self-creation, and self-knowledge—to a new concept of the "subject" riven by self-estrangement and self-fragmentation [...] As a result, the project of self-presentation could no longer be read as providing direct access to the truth of the self. (200-201)

On the matter of self-alienation, American critics Paul Jay, James Olney, Michael Sprinker and Louis Renza amongst others postulated a split between the narrating self and the narrated self in autobiography. In his well-known essay, "The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography" (1977), Renza asserted that "the written autobiographical act [...] yields [a] divorce between the writing self and his textual rendition" (278). Renza's paper is of particular significance to autobiography theory for he argued that the gap between the writing self and the written self inevitably leads to a sense of estrangement:[1] Renza's contention is namely that life narratives are "alienated" (273) not only because of the inescapable and simultaneous presence of the two selves, but also by virtue of the fact that there is a rupture between remembering past events and recording them in the present (275-276).[2]

In another shift, a group of autobiography theorists—influenced by deconstruction and poststructuralism, and especially by the way they decentered the subject in favour of language—turned their attention towards *graphia*, i.e. to life as a written construct. Paul de

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[1] John Freccero is another critic who has argued that "any story of the self implies a separation between the self as as protagonist and the self as narrator" (19). The notion of having two selves can clearly be recognised in the figure of the doppelgänger in Edward Said's autobiography *Out of Place*. Refusing to answer to the interpellation of his family, Said sets out to discover who he really is. To do so, he consciously tries to recollect and articulate the past. Finally it is the faculty of writing, then, that allows him to exhume what he calls his "second self" (217).

[2] In "Moving Beyond the Deconstructive Impasse in the Criticism of Autobiography," Johnathan Loseberg notes the impact deconstruction had on autobiography studies. Loseberg writes that deconstructionists convincingly argued that "the self was a fiction and, consequently, the text having no self to refer to must also be a fiction" (119).

Man's now landmark paper "Autobiography as De-facement" (1979) emphasised the precedence of language in life stories; he argued that instead of being a genre, autobiography was "a figure of reading" (921) and that it had a "tropological constitution" (922). De Man suggested that the text shaped the writer's life (instead of the other way around)[3] and that, as such,

> [t]he interest of autobiography is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge—it does not—but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions. (922)

Eva Kormann notes that De Man's paper, together with a special edition of *Modern Language Notes* that appeared in 1978, inaugurated a new phase in autobiography theory (57). She writes that "two central premises of the hitherto dominant classic autobiography theory, the existence of a pre-linguistic I that can be represented in language and the referentiality of the genre, were no longer acknowledged by the representatives of the linguistic turn: the subject had disappeared, and textuality was regarded as unavoidable" (58).[4] De Man and like-minded theorists, one might say, finally reduced autobiography to a fictive construct. This postmodern break with the factual, and its privileging of textuality, would moreover appear to be the order of the present day; indeed, in spite of the developments that autobiography theory has undergone since the 1980s (to which I turn below), the contemporary reader seems, in essence, to have held on to the truth-figure that De Man wrote about. According to Gioia Woods, "In third-wave autobiography criticism, we assume that writing is a form of invention that creates the self, and that any autobiographical act is performative" (351).

Autobiography theory, in short, is characterised by a shift in focus from "life" to "self" to "writing" while at the same time being marked by a deep skepticism of the ability of life narratives to tell the truth. There has, however, been a related development running parallel to the aforementioned changes, namely the gradual realisation that attempts at demarcating the genre are futile. While in the 1950s and 1960s critics like Wayne Shumaker and Roy Pascal tried to provide intrinsic definitions of autobiography (Kormann 47-51), the next decade saw a break with these attempts as most notably Philippe Lejeune and Elizabeth Bruss started looking at autobiography from the reader's point of view. While Lejeune

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[3] In "Life as Narrative" (1987), Jerome Bruner posits that "eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very 'events' of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives" (672, emphasis original).

[4] The translation is my own; the original German reads "[…] die zwei zentralen Prämissen der bis dahin herrschenden klassischen Autobiographietheorie, die Existenz eines vorsprachlichen und mit Sprache abbildbaren Ich und die Referentialität der Gattung, werden von den Vertretern eines linguistic turn nicht mehr anerkannt: Das Subjekt ist verschwunden, und Textualität gilt als nicht hintergehbar" (Kormann 58).

"[established] a pact, or contract, between author and reader" (Jones 175),[5] Bruss argued that what genre theory should do is to outline "a literary category that actually 'exists,' in the sense that it can be experienced as something that constrains or directs the acts of interpretation and writing, or at least provides readers and writers with an interpretation of their activities" (qtd. in S.F.R. 182).

In the next two decades or so, theorists began to steer away from providing genre definitions.[6] This was not only because "generic and disciplinary borders and boundaries [had] started to break down" (Marcus 273), but also because the endeavour to categorically define autobiography had proved to be more problematic than initially thought. To be sure, whatever there differences, one thing theorists agreed on was that it was impossible to pin down autobiography. Whether it was said to lead to "a number of problems" (Jay 14), or whether it was compared to a "battlefield on which competing ideas of literature [were] fought out" (Folkenflik 11), or seen as "emblematic of issues with which modern criticism [found] itself […] sorely vexed" (Dickson 98), when it came to defining the autobiographical genre, critics concurred that it was no mean task.

In trying to account for the difficulty of encapsulating that which constitutes autobiography, many a theorist has postulated that it is because the genre is shifty. While James Olney has observed that autobiography "is the most elusive of literary documents" ("Autobiography and the Cultural Movement" 3), Leigh Gilmore has spoken of its "doubled nature" ("The Mark of Autobiography" 6), Linda Anderson of its "pervasiveness and slipperiness" (2) and Laura Marcus of the "instability or hybridity of autobiography as genre" (7). More recently, Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Wolfgang Görtschacher have described autobiography as an essentially "undefined genre" (xi) and Claire Lynch as "arguably the most underhand of all literary genres, consistently avoiding the definitions fashioned for it and eluding the genre boundaries expected of it" (209). The shiftiness of autobiography thus continues to be a point of discussion among critics. In the next section it will moreover transpire that the form's elusiveness will also take centre stage in this work. At the same time, however, it will become apparent that I do not so much recognise as intervene in autobiography theory, for I argue that the genre is not merely slippery but *exilic* by nature. Further I suggest that it is precisely this quality which makes autobiography intrinsically suitable for narratives that deal with the subject's sense of displacement. As will become apparent, the texts in hand all illustrate this interdependency for they bring together the

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[5] According to Lejeune's well-known diagram of the autobiographical pact, the protagonist and author might share a name in an autobiography but *not* in a novel (*On Autobiography* 16). This idea has been challenged amongst others by Serge Doubrovsky. In "Autobiography/Truth/Psychoanalysis," Doubrovsky comments on the narrative strategy employed in his novel *Fils*. While *Fils* declares itself to be a work of fiction, it reveals the writer, narrator and protagonist to be the same person. Doubrovsky writes, "it is as if *Fils* had been written to fill [one of Lejeune's] empty square[s]" (33) and coins the term "autofiction" to describe this "fake fiction of a real life" (34, emphasis original).

[6] H. Porter Abbott discusses the difficulties surrounding the attempts to delimit the autobiographical genre in the seventies and eighties in "Autobiography, Autography, Fiction: Groundwork for a Taxonomy of Textual Categories" (597-615).

alienated self on the one hand and the alienated text on the other. What this essentially means is that the seemingly important distinction made during the second and third phase of autobiography theory—the focus on the self versus the focus on writing—is obfuscated.

An inherently homeless genre

Theorists have suggested that its inexorable slipperiness makes autobiography a near impossibility to emplace. With this in mind, I would like to call autobiography an inherently homeless genre.[7] Clearly, in doing so, I am citing a trope often used in relation to alienation. If we think of a home, as Elisabeth Bronfen has noted in *Home in Hollywood*, we might imagine a building and possibly a garden, located at a certain address, a place where families convene. But we might also imagine something more profound than that, something that goes beyond a building's physical structure. We might, that is, imagine a "place of belonging" (22). It is the contention here that home as a trope for belonging can be applied, by extension, to genre studies. Taking drama or poetry, for instance, one can say that their boundaries are fairly stable and definable, and that in this sense they have their own place in the literary tradition.[8] Not so with autobiography—being too slippery to pinpoint and classify, it cannot be circumscribed or emplaced; in other words, it does not unequivocally belong anywhere and is therefore not quite at home in the existing canon of genres.

That autobiography is at bottom an exilic genre is evinced by the ease with which it moves between different literary worlds, and especially between the realms of fact and fiction. As contemporary as it may seem, however, the practice of including the make-believe in life stories is not a recent phenomenon. In fact, according to Eugene Stelzig, "the presence of fiction in autobiographical narrative per se goes back at least as far as the early nineteenth century" (257). This, according to Stelzig, is evinced amongst others in Goethe's *Poetry and Truth* and in De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (257). Max Saunders writes that in the following period, during modernism, the interweaving of fact and fiction in life stories was not only present but rife ("Autobiografiction" 1041-1059). This, in turn, ostensibly paved the way for autobiographers in the next literary period, as postmodern writers continued experimenting with the enmeshment of different text types in life narrative (*Self Impression* 484).

In "Autobiografiction: Experimental Life-Writing from the Turn of the Century to Modernism" Saunders traces the evolution of life writing between 1880 and 1930 (1041-1059). He posits that during this time artists such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust,

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[7] By designating it as *inherently* homeless I mean to imply that autobiography is homeless by nature; i.e. I do not mean to say that it is a literary form which merely deals with the subject of homelessness (although this is often the case) but that it is a type of writing that does not categorically belong to any one genre.

[8] In *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, published in 1950, Georg Misch comments on the difficulty in defining autobiography by comparing it to other, more stable genres. In this respect he posits that "[autobiography's] boundaries are more fluid and less definable in relation to form than those of lyric or epic poetry or of drama, which [...] have preserved unity of form throughout their development" (4).

Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein wrote life narratives that were innovative and new.[9] Saunders singles out the enmeshment of fact and fiction as one of modernism's most salient characteristics; further he believes the fusion of autobiographical fact and fiction to have been such a distinguishing feature of the period that he calls for its reconceptualization. Thus Saunders suggests that modernism should not be seen in terms of "the conventional account of its quest for the impersonal, [but] as developing [...] fin-de-siècle experiments in fusing life-writing and fiction" (1041).

Besides the amalgamation of different literary types, another important feature of the modernist period was that it was no longer the length of a text that constituted its status as autobiography.[10] Basing his assertions on an essay written by Stephen Reynolds in 1906, Saunders remarks that in the period that followed realism, examples of "autobiografiction" (or autobiography in which fact and fiction commingle) were "[stretched] to include essay-length pieces–like [Charles] Lamb's ['Dream Children']" (1046). At the same time, Saunders points out that modernist life narratives featured "masks, personae [and] unreliable narrators" (1052); accordingly he posits that though they were similar in content to fictional works produced during the period, autobiographies by artists such as Joyce and Proust complicated the form by, amongst others, using make-believe writers in their narratives. This, according to Saunders, allowed autobiographers to create self-reflexive texts and to reflect on the art of writing life narratives (1054).

While the enmeshment of fact and fiction, then, is not new to autobiography, it is also not new to its *theory*. To be sure, at least since the onset of modernism, theorists have written about the effects of combining fiction and auto/biographical fact. In a later chapter I take an in-depth look at the way in which literary criticism has historically focused on the interplay of fact and fiction in life writing.[11] For the moment, however, I will concentrate on more recent developments in this field of study so as to situate these alongside the contemporary narratives chosen for analysis. In the previous section I pointed out the postmodern break with the factual, and how literary critics like Paul de Man saw autobiography as a fictive construct and not as an account of a subject (however disjoint he or she might be) or of a life lived. In the late seventies—and thus around the time that De Man published "Autobiography as De-facement"—theorists extensively debated the question whether autobiography is, or

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[9] Writing on expatriate autobiography and American Modernism, Craig Monk argues that despite being "a relatively underutilized form, [autobiography] soon proved itself to be the kind of aesthetic innovation that came to define modern literature" (11). Further he claims that "the works of expatriate Americans contributed to the distinctive techniques of modern narrative" (11).

[10] With reference to autobiographers writing in the early twentieth century, Suzanne Nalbantian makes a distinction between what she calls "'aesthetic autobiographers" and those who practised the art of "autobiography proper" (18). According to Nalbantian, while the latter group worked to ensure that the borders between autobiography and fiction remained clearly marked and in tact, the first experimented with the form. Nalbantian further points out that this type of experimentation not only included creating "a hybrid genre" (18), but also focusing on "significant moments" in the subject's life which were "[replacing] the standard linear chronology of the [autobiographical] narrative" (17).

[11] Reference is to Chapter 4, in which I contend that Doris Lessing's *Alfred & Emily* continues the Woolfian idea that life narratives need to combine fact and fiction in pursuit of the truth.

should be, a mixture of truth and invention, or whether it is a mode of nonfiction that merely uses fictional techniques.[12] The (dis)entanglement of fact and fiction in autobiography remained a popular topic for discussion throughout the eighties and nineties, with critics like Jerome Bruner positing that "there is no such thing as a 'uniquely' true, correct, or even faithful autobiography" ("The Autobiographical Process" 39), and Robert Folkenflik that autobiographies "may be truthful or mendacious [but they] may also be ostensibly fiction" (13-14).

A related debate asked what it was that made an autobiographical piece true in the first place.[13] In this respect, Laura Marcus, among others, posited that it was the "'intention' to tell the truth" (3), and not how accurate it was, that guaranteed autobiography's truthfulness.[14] This idea of autobiographical truth was evidently a harking back to a notion first expressed by the person considered to be the father of modern autobiography, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Sprinker 326; Fowlie 166; Anderson 43). In *Confessions*, published in stages between 1782 and 1789, Rousseau posits that as there are gaps in his recollection of the past, he has had to invent or embellish certain parts of his life story (5). He insists, however, that though he might not have been completely truthful in conveying all the details, he has given a sincere account of his person and of his inner thoughts:

> I may make factual omissions, transpositions, errors in dates; but I cannot be mistaken about what I felt, nor about what my feelings led me to do; and this is what principally concerns me here. The particular object of my confessions is to make known my inner self [...]. It is the history of my soul that I promised [...]. (270)

In autobiography studies of the current century, fact and fiction—and especially their uses and effects—have continued to be written about. A case in point is *Autobiography*, in which Linda Anderson looks at what might happen when a life narrative blurs the borders between fact and fiction to such an extent that readers feel deceived. Anderson then goes on to posit, however, that the attempt to categorise autobiography as either fact or fiction is futile in the first place, and that what should be focused on instead is the way in which fictionalising the past might allow us to see things differently (132). A similar idea is expressed in *Fiction and Autobiography: Modes and Models of Interaction*, edited by Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Wolfgang Görtschacher. For the essays that make up this collection are said not only to thematise how a life might be turned into a work of art but also to "demonstrate how fruitful a critical focus on the interaction between autobiography and fiction proves for

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[12] In the aforementioned *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (1980), edited by James Olney, the enmeshment of fact and fiction in autobiography is discussed extensively.

[13] The question of referentiality in autobiography is looked at in detail in Chapter 1.

[14] According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "autobiographical truth resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life" (16). In this respect, they refer to Susanna Egan and her notion of "'mirror talk' [which] captures the refractive interplay of such dialogic exchange between life narrator and reader (or viewer)" (16).

understanding the complex strategies by which subject positions are established and communicated" (ix-xi).

That fabricating the past is seen today as being part and parcel of the autobiographical enterprise bears witness to the fact that the movement autobiography theory has undergone is one characterised by an expansion of boundaries.[15] This development not only entails the acknowledgment of the important role fiction has played in the field, but also the inclusion of different narrative types under the rubric "autobiography." Indeed, while in the eighties it was still disputed what might or might not be classified as autobiography (Finney 13), by the early nineties autobiography's borders had been opened up to include poems, non-written narratives, paintings, and even musical compositions (Folkenflik 12).

Alfred Hornung has noted contemporary scholarship's engagement with the way in which the practice of life narrative has continued to enlarge its scope. In the introduction to *Auto/ Biography and Mediation*, a collection of essays edited by Hornung and published in 2010, he singles out two primary concerns of autobiography theorists today. According to Hornung, these comprise the way in which the genre cuts across academic disciplines, including the arts and the sciences, as well as the fact that autobiography has increasingly expanded its borders to include various types of media:

> [...] auto/biographical narratives display an ever-increasing range of media in which lives or parts of lives are presented: print media, performance, film and video, radio and tapes, or the Internet. Many autobiographers combine different media for intermedial effects, such as the inclusion of photography in texts, voice and music on the radio or tapes, sound and images in filmic auto/biography, or music and dance in self-performances. Autobiographical multi-media installations dissolve the boundaries between genres and technologies of signification [...] The articles collected in this volume also address ways in which autobiographical narratives mediate between different disciplines of the humanities, the social and natural sciences and medicine. (xii)

Hornung's use of the term "auto/biography" implies that the essays in *Auto/Biography and Mediation* are mainly concerned with texts in which there is an interplay of autobiography and biography. In turn, biography, autobiography and auto/biography are, of course, all forms of what has been collectively referred to since the 1980s as "life-writing."[16] The Oxford Centre for Life-Writing (OCLW) defines life writing as follows:

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[15] Another expansion autobiography has seen is the inclusion of minority groups. The most interesting developments in this regard arguably took place when feminists and ethnic minorities re-evaluated the autobiographical oeuvre so that by the 1990s women and other marginalised voices had grown loud in their condemnation of privileging autobiographies written by Western males; for an interesting discussion on the matter, see Julia Watson "Toward an Anti-Metaphysics of Autobiography."

[16] According to Margaretta Jolly, while the first recorded use of the word "life writing" dates back to the 18th century, it only started being widely applied in research studies in the 1980s (ix). Claire Lynch remarks that "Whilst writers may thrive as a consequence of [autobiography's] freedom, theorists are inclined to control this 'unruly' genre by reclassifying it as 'life writing', a broader category which includes autobiographies, biographies, case studies, diaries, memoirs, autobiographical novels, ethnography, blogs, profiles and numerous other forms" (210).

> Life-writing involves, and goes beyond, biography. It encompasses everything from the complete life to the day-in-the-life, from the fictional to the factional. It embraces the lives of objects and institutions as well as the lives of individuals, families and groups.
>
> Life-writing includes autobiography, memoirs, letters, diaries, journals (written and documentary), anthropological data, oral testimony, and eye-witness accounts. It is not only a literary or historical specialism, but is relevant across the arts and sciences, and can involve philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, ethnographers and anthropologists. (pars. 1-2)

The texts that will be looked at in this thesis are exemplary in the way they foreground how life narratives might traverse different genres and disciplines. Not only do they engage with sociological and philosophical questions but they also feature a mix of fact and fiction, and include different text types and media, such as history, biography, diary writing and photography.[17] However, at the same time that they blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, and between genres, the five narratives selected for analysis remain fundamentally autobiographical in style. Thus, whether labelled "autobiography," "auto/biography" or "memoir,"[18] they do not only draw on other text types within the life writing canon itself, but also on fiction and on nonliterary sources. This is an essential point to make, as it is precisely by virtue of the fact that they navigate between different media and modes, all the while retaining their autobiographical framework, that these works will be argued to underline the exilic nature of autobiography.

The estrangement of the self

Assumptions about the autobiographical genre have changed from regarding it, in the late nineteenth century, as having clearly discernible borders and as giving a factual account of a life lived, to a type of writing in the contemporary age which questions its own truthfulness and which resists categorisation altogether. As intimated before, a similar development can be traced with respect to the self. According to Linda Hutcheon, in postmodernity the subject

[17] As they conflate fact and fiction, life writing can be seen as part of "faction" i.e. the "literary or cinematic genre in which real events are used as a basis for a fictional narrative or dramatization" ("faction" from the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

[18] In "Are Memoirs Autobiography?" Julie Rak writes that "[memoir] has been treated as a minor form of autobiography by critics. But in the North American publishing industry, 'memoir' is in the process of becoming a byword for autobiography" (305). In what I have stated above, I certainly do not mean to imply that "memoir" and "autobiography" are the same; however, in this work memoir will be seen as fundamentally autobiographical in character, and thus as having the same fluidity of borders as texts officially termed "autobiography." In the next chapter I return to the precise meaning of the term "memoir," and especially to how the difference between "memoir" and "autobiography" might be exploited by the life writer to achieve a sense of displacement on the part of the reader.

has typically been described as an unstable entity which does not govern itself but which is shaped by outside forces including language and history:[19]

> [Postmodern] subjectivity is represented as something in process, never as fixed and never as autonomous, outside history. It is always a gendered subjectivity, rooted also in class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. (37)

Thus it is commonplace today to see the self not as fixed or in control, but as a construct and constantly in flux. Regarding this fundamental change in Western philosophical thinking, Jens Zimmermann has posited that with postmodernism "the Cartesian or scientific epistemology of absolute certainty [was replaced] with the equally dogmatic position that all knowledge is interpretation" (1).[20] Seeing that the contemporary subject, then, enjoys neither stability nor the certainty of self-knowledge, we might say that it is locked into a constant state of self-estrangement. It follows that self-alienation is something we all of us are familiar with, as contemporary theorists have been at pains to point out. While David Bevan, for example, has posited that exile is "a condition that is perhaps inscribed at some level into the experience of every human being [...] a constant of our common predicament" (3), Thomas Pavel has argued that, "exile may stand in for many things, in particular the pervasive feeling human beings often experience that they do not entirely belong in the sublunar world" (26).

Andrea Hammel notes that in psychoanalysis exile is seen as a prerequisite for the maturation of the subject, and hence affects all people. Accordingly, as we grow up we are constantly distancing ourselves from our mothers so that we cannot help but have the impression of being perpetually in exile (15). Alternatively, as Julia Kristeva has pointed out in *Strangers to Ourselves*, psychoanalysis teaches us that we all harbour a foreign entity within. Kristeva picks up on the Freudian notion of the uncanny, which posits a return to the surface of something familiar which has been repressed, thereby producing an experience of foreignness.[21] Since the foreigner is intrinsically and inescapably part of our psyche, Kristeva believes that when we encounter exiles and immigrants what we are really confronted with is

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[19] Contemporary autobiography theorists have similarly shown an interest in the shaping of the subject,"[whose] construction is governed not only by generic and aesthetic considerations, but by external factors such as editorial intrusion [...] religion [...] multicultural experience as well as by cultural preconceptions, by gender and gender roles" (Coelsch-Foisner and Görtschacher x). Regarding the contemporary interest in the self, Annaleen Masschelein points out that "Paradoxically, [in the post-poststructuralist era] the 'subjectless' theories of structuralism and poststructuralism coincide with a return of the subject and the subjective in the artistic and cultural domain" (1). She adds, however, that the subject has changed and is now "fragmented, affected and penetrated by the media-saturated environment in which it is situated" (1).

[20] Zimmermann further posits that "After the linguistic turn, philosophical reflection has entered a new phase, the so-called ethical turn. After years of deconstructing both the human subject and its arrogant aspirations to divinity or absolute knowledge through metaphysics, postmodern philosophy has begun to realize that deconstructing the human self can become as dehumanizing as the god-like self of its metaphysical predecessors" (1).

[21] See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" in Freud, *Standard Edition,* 17: 217-256.

our own internal alien (182-192).[22] Our resentment of outsiders can thus be ascribed to our unwillingness to acknowledge the foreigner living inside us. Conversely, if we accept the fact that we are strangers to ourselves, we will no longer feel antagonistic towards the flesh-and-blood alien wandering the street:

> Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself [...] The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners [...] (1)

Applying not psychoanalysis but sociology to unravel the question of universal estrangement, Tibor Dessewffy attributes the alienation of modern man to the multiplicity of conflicting roles he perforce needs to play. Accordingly, it is out of necessity that our personalities are split into various parts and that they are duly complex. Consequently, we are—though in quite a different sense to Kristeva's use of the phrase—strangers to ourselves (353).

This thesis examines the ways in which contemporary life narratives thematise the postmodern subject's experience of foreignness. At the same time, it suggests that the unease accompanying the individual's already-existing sense of alienation is exacerbated when he or she is subjected to other, more tangible forms of displacement. Admittedly, while I have established what is meant by internal estrangement, I have not yet looked at any "tangible" forms of exile. In due course I will, then, turn my attention to the many and diverse types of dislocation that individuals might encounter during their lifetime. Before I do so, however, it is interesting to note that although we distinguish between different kinds of exile, the mechanism by which they work is fundamentally the same. Accordingly, in what follows, I will analyse the schematics of displacement. By doing so, I hope to lay the foundations for arguing, in the next section, that different instances of exile have similar effects and that they work together to compound the subject's sense of malaise.

In order to understand how there can be a commonly shared structure subtending different types of dislocation, it is instructive to turn to work done by Sigmund Freud. In *The Interpretation of Dreams,* Freud talks about displacement in relation to dreams (78-83; 190-194). He starts off by postulating that we have two different psychic forces that come into play when we dream. While one agency gives shape to the wish expressed by our dream, the other agency is responsible for censoring that wish. This latter agency distorts our dream-wish by superimposing mundane events over significant ones, which explains why we often dream of seemingly unimportant experiences of the day and not of that which caused us to dream in the first place. In this way, there is a displacement of "the psychic accent" (80), which is to say that those things that play a pivotal role in the dream-content do not

[22] This ties in with the Lacanian notion of "extimacy," which blurs the line between interior and exterior, and according to which the Other is at the same time something foreign to the subject but also at its core. See Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (59).

necessarily play the same role in the dream-thoughts. Conversely, the "nucleus of the dream-thoughts" (193) does not have to be present in the dream at all. This means that the content of the dream is ordered around elements which do not make up the centre of the dream-thoughts, while the essential elements are relegated elsewhere. Thus, as a result of dream-displacement, there is a disparity between the dream-content and the core of the dream-thoughts, and concomitantly, a distortion of the dream-wish (190-194).

Freud's appropriation and application of displacement can be used as an analogy for different types of dislocation, if we understand the centre to be that which we believe is essential to our being.[23] Thus, whether talking about physical, cultural, linguistic or psychic exile, the act of dislodging involves the centre being removed and replaced by a new set of elements.[24] While in dreams the new content can be understood as subordinate events which replace the nucleus of the dream-thoughts, in geographical displacement, for example, the centre that is removed typically refers to the home country, which is relegated to the margin and replaced by a new reality (that of the host country). Similarly, in linguistic displacement, the native tongue is replaced by a foreign language, while in familial displacement individuals exchange their position within the family set up for a reality in which they are family-less. Thus it appears that when what we believe makes up the core of our being is removed and replaced by less significant elements or by a subordinate reality, we find ourselves on the fringes of a society, a language, a culture, a family, or whatever the case may be. As we experience a profound sense of malaise whenever this happens, being marginalized on account of more than one reason will exacerbate our innate feelings of malcontent; that is, make us suffer an even greater sense of unease than is generally attributed to our postmodern condition.

Displacement and discontent

In this section I want to look at the different manifestations of exile as well as at the interrelatedness of dislocation and discontent. Displacement comes in all sorts of shapes and guises, but a good starting point is topographic displacement. Roger Whitehouse has noted that though geographic exile is not a new phenomenon per se, the twentieth century experienced it "on an enormous and unprecedented scale" (1). For this reason other leading critics in the field such as Edward Said has dubbed the modern era the age of "vast human migration" (*Reflections on Exile* xiv). While Said attributes this state of affairs to "war, colonialism and decolonization, economic and political revolutions, [as well as] famine, ethnic cleansing, and great power machinations" (xiv), Piotr Kuhiwczak believes the increase

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[23]In *Displacement—Derrida and After*, Mark Krupnick argues that the term "displacement" has broadened its application since Freud initiated its use with regard to dream-work at the start of twentieth century. According to Krupnick, "it has become an indispensable term of the post-structuralist theory ...[ ]" (1). Further he contends that it "is central to [Derrida's] decentering mode of critique" (1).

[24] In his paper "Exile, Self, and Society" Robert Edwards accordingly sees exile as the "translation from the center to the periphery, from organized space invested with meaning to a boundary where the conditions of experience are problematic" (16-17).

in the number of exiles to be the consequence of "the emergence of European nation-states" (33). According to Kuhiwczak, such nation-states have not only produced vast numbers of displaced peoples, but they have also created new types of exiles, including "people expelled because they belonged to an ethnic minority, did not speak the approved national language, or simply questioned the basis of a state founded on linguistic and cultural homogeneity" (33).

Paradoxically, due to mass migration as well as the globalisation of markets and the advances in technology and travel, national borders are increasingly being crossed, and becoming less stable in the process. On this matter, Caren Kaplan has argued that because of the vast number of people who have had to leave their homes, "domestic, national, or marked spaces no longer exist" (7).[25] Further she points out that despite the role exiled peoples have played in producing languages of dislocation, their contribution has hardly been acknowledged:[26]

> Immigrants, refugees, exiles, nomads, and the homeless [...] move in and out of [...] discourses [of displacement] as metaphors, tropes, and symbols but rarely as historically recognized producers of critical discourses themselves. Euro-American discourses of displacement tend to absorb difference and create ahistorical amalgams. (2)

While probing into the history of dislocation—be it to pinpoint its political and economic causes, or to relate it to its discourses—is certainly a legitimate and useful enterprise, it is not the historicisation of exile which will be of immediate concern in this work. Instead, it is how the experience of dislocation affects the subject's being that will be my main focus. Thus, in cases of geographical displacement, I am less interested in the actual loss of land than in how it changes the way the dispossessed see themselves. I am, then, after the type of understanding Karen Blixen shows in *Out of Africa*, an autobiographical account of the time the author spent in Kenya. One event in particular reveals Blixen's insight into the way individuals are affected when they are forced to leave their homes. When her farm goes bankrupt and the Baroness is left with no choice but to sell, the new owners give the squatters six months to leave. It is then that Blixen points out the repercussions of physically driving people out of their homes are far more complex than merely depriving them of their land:

> It is more than their land that you take away from the people, whose native land you take. *It is their past as well, their roots and their identity*. If you take away the things that they have been used to see, and will be expecting to see, you may, in a way, as well take their eyes. (319, my emphasis)

To Blixen, denying someone their emplacement in the world has a serious impact on who they are. That the effects of spatial dislocation are not merely physical but also spiritual has

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[25] On the shiftiness that terms such as "home" and "nation" have acquired in postmodernity and postcolonialism, see Elisabeth Bronfen "A Sense of Strangeness: The Gender of Cultural Identity in Bharati Mukerjee's *Jasmine*" (1994).

[26] This ties in with the identity politics of the 1990s; see Christina Heyes "Identity Politics" on the movement's aims to rewrite the way marginalised groups have historically been portrayed.

more recently been noted by Chinua Achebe. In *Home and Exile*, Achebe asserts that forceful removals make people suffer on two accounts. Firstly there is the actual loss of land, and then there is what he refers to as "the trauma of a diminished existence" (70). Similarly, Sue Gee has argued that exile ultimately affects our sense of self. Gee namely posits that being exiled means being spiritually displaced, and that this can be seen in the way that people who have *not* been forced to leave their homes respond to exile:

> The ways in which [exile] speaks so potently to those who have never experienced the literal nightmare of dispossession, displacement or banishment imply that it taps into fundamental fears about losing that which we most cherish, that which we feel has shaped our identity and continued to nourish us. (13)

To relate the above to what was argued before, one might say that the idea of being physically exiled affects us because it poses a threat to the core of our being, to what I have compared with the nucleus of our dream-thoughts. Of course, geographic dislocation never works alone but is commonly abetted by cultural, social and linguistic alienation. Wojciech Kalaga notes that while moving to a new place brings about obvious changes to one's living conditions, it is cultural dislocation which "most globally embraces one's subjectivity and one's self" (49). Kalaga points out that in their new country, exiles are often confronted with a foreign language and culture. Finding themselves on the outside, he argues that exiled persons have a choice—they can either come to terms with their new world and rewrite their selves into an unfamiliar language and culture (all the while realising that their new self is not their true self), or they can reject their new surroundings altogether (56). In similar vein, Marta Zając has referred to exile as "an event of exclusion" (77), and has accordingly compared it to the opposition between being on the inside or the outside:

> The inside demarcates the flourishing centre, the norm, the canon. The outside functions as its dilapidated margin. To put it simply, the inside is where *we are*, and the outside is where *the other* has been distanced or, as the postmodern age insists, the space into which the Other is only believed to have been distanced. (78)

While it is true that being geographically displaced and culturally marginalised leads to feelings of isolation and loss,[27] it is also true that we do not have to be physically removed from our homes and installed in a foreign country to feel excluded from our surroundings. As Susan Suleiman has remarked, marginalised communities realise all too well that "one can be an outsider in one's own home town" (2). In such cases the actual territory appears to be of lesser importance than the fact that one is living in a space where one culture is dominant

[27] Feelings of unease might also be seen as a type of defence mechanism. A case in point is Sindiwe Magona's fictional autobiography *Mother to Mother*, which is based on the actual events that unfolded around the murder of American scholar Amy Elizabeth Biehl, who went to South Africa in 1993 to assist black people with the upcoming democratic elections, the first in the country's history. Recounting the story from the perspective of the killer's mother, the narrator wonders at Amy's decision to enter Guguletu township, and asks in dismay "where was her natural sense of unease?" (3).

over another.[28] This state of affairs typically has one of two outcomes: it can either incite the subjugated group to reassert their cultural identity and celebrate their heritage and traditions, *or* it can induce them to try and gain access to the new culture. To Homi Bhabha, however, one culture should not take precedence over another, nor should one have to choose between one's old and new self. Rather, attention should be paid to "'in-between' spaces [that] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood" (2). For, according to Bhabha, embracing hybridity or what he calls the "third space" (qtd. in Rutherford 211) will lead to new formations of power and "[enable] other positions to emerge" (211).[29]

Dislocation, then, can occur when a people and their culture are repressed and/or pushed to the periphery. However, as Roland Barthes has shown, it is also quite possible to live amongst one's own and still feel excluded. In his anti-autobiography *Roland Barthes*, in a fragment aptly entitled "L'exclusion*,"* Barthes relates how one day, while observing a wedding, he has an overpowering impression of being an outsider. The reason, he tells us, for "faltering [...] under the effect of the silliest of spectacles: ceremonial, religious, and petit bourgeoisie" (85-86) is that he is reminded of all the ways in which he is alienated, including being removed from the very language he needs in order to capture his sense of estrangement. But there is another reason that language alienates Barthes, namely that his intellectual discourse sets him apart from "ordinary" speech. Thus, in "Céline et Flora," Barthes asserts that because he is a writer, he is removed from "current ('popular') language" (86). In another fragment, his alienation as a result of language is so keenly felt that he equates his being excluded from the dominant discourse to "a kind of racism" *(*103). These feelings are also hinted at in "L'atopie;" here Barthes writes that being an intellectual has put him in a specific bracket and that "against [such pigeonholing] there is only one internal doctrine: that of *atopia* (of a drifting habitation)" (49).

Displacement can thus take on a number of meanings, from self-alienation through to being a stranger in a foreign culture as well as within one's own. Throughout my discussion I have been working towards an understanding of how exile is a part of who we are as well as how it affects our selves. In the cases cited above, I have shown how it leads to exclusion, fragmentation, loss of identity, uncertainty, trauma, alienation and unease. Ultimately, I will argue that autobiography, by virtue of the fact that it is an inherently homeless genre, is the

[28] Wojciech Kalaga draws our attention to the fact that what we are dealing with is two different spaces. In this he refers to the work done by Kateryna O. Longley, who draws a distinction between the "Fourth" and the "Fifth World"—while the first "is usually associated with the cultural space occupied by indigenous people, who have been colonised by a foreign or different culture" the latter refers to the space "inhabited by uprooted and displaced people [...] by those who—as exiles from their own terrain—try to inscribe themselves in cultures not their own" (55).

[29] For an interview with Homi Bhabha on the "third space" see Jonathan Rutherford, *Identity—Community, Culture, Difference (*207-221).

mode par excellence to depict these interrelated feelings of foreignness and malaise.[30] To the end of making such a claim, the ensuing chapters examine the different ways in which contemporary life narratives have exploited the exilic nature of the autobiographical genre to convey the subject's sense of dislocation. But while this thesis argues a relation between the homelessness of autobiography and the homelessness of the self, it also asks if bringing across the subject's exilic experiences was the writer's intention in the first place. That is to say, it considers whether autobiographers (only) write about exile in order to convey their sense of malaise to the reader or whether there might be other motives behind their writing and, if indeed it be the case, how these tie in with the arguments presented here. As I have previously looked at the displaced state of the autobiographical text and its subject, in what follows I turn my attention to the reasons life writers might have for putting down their exilic experiences on paper, as well as get up to speed on what contemporary criticism has to say on the matter.

To impair or animate?

Displacement may be ubiquitous and ultimately lead to unease but, as André Aciman has noted, this does not mean that all uprooted writers share exactly the same exilic experience, or, for that matter, that they all have the same reasons for writing about it:

> Everyone's exile is different, and every writer has his or her own way of groping in the dark. Some have triumphed over exile. Others even found displacement exciting, invigorating. Others were able to don it and doff it, like a costume, while others have never been able to shake it off. (9)

The passage above gives one an idea of the impact that the experience of foreignness might have on writers—it might incite creativity, it might be accepted and overcome, it might never be got rid of. Obversely one can say that authors write about exile *because* it is "invigorating" (Aciman 9), or *because* it can help them to work through the trauma of uprooting, irrespective of whether they come to grips with it or whether they are never quite able to "shake it off" (Aciman 9). A text written about displacement could therefore owe its existence to a number of reasons, of which literary composition as a way of dealing with alienation will be my starting point.

Naturally, the phrase *dealing with alienation* is overdetermined since, as Aciman points out, not everyone copes with homelessness in the same way or with the same amount of

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[30] This obviously does not mean that other genres are not capable of portraying dislocation but that autobiography naturally lends itself to works dealing with estrangement and exclusion. This contention is, of course, directly opposed to that of Georg Lukács. In "Reflections on Exile" Edward Said supports the aforementioned claim by arguing that "Much of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule. […]. The exile's new world, logically enough, is unnatural and its unreality resembles fiction. George Lukács, in *Theory of the Novel*, argued with compelling force that the novel, a literary form created out of the unreality of ambition and fantasy, is *the* form of 'transcendental homelessness'" (*Reflections on Exile* 181). While I take Said's, and indeed Lukács's point, I believe the autobiographical genre is particularly suited to conveying feelings of dislocation as it is a fundamentally exilic genre. As such, it can freely move between fact and fantasy and hence may include the world of fiction, or the "unreal" world of the émigré. Finally, autobiography demands a separation of the writing "I" and the written "I," thus making the mode alienating in yet another, third instance.

success. One way of trying to come to terms with dislocation is to try to hold onto former times, and to see writing as a means of resuscitating the past. In this respect, Roger Whitehouse has identified the desire to retrieve and emplace the past as the motive behind many a text written in exile. This, according to Whitehouse, is because "[recapturing] a lost past [...] provides a counter to the rootlessness and fluidity of exile" (2). Another strategy to deal with displacement is to regard the writing process as a healing process.[31] An illustration of this is Joan Didion's memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, in which the author tries to process the violent and sudden uprooting of her life brought on by the death of her husband and her daughter's falling dangerously ill. By writing about these events, Didion ostensibly tries to come to terms with the rug being pulled from under her feet, as she explains herself:

> It is now, as I begin to write this, the afternoon of October 4, 2004.
> Nine months and five days ago, at approximately nine o'clock on the evening of December 30, 2003, my husband, John Gregory Dunne, appeared to (or did) experience, at the table where he and I had just sat down to dinner in the living room of our apartment in New York, a sudden massive coronary event that caused his death. Our only child, Quintana, had been for the previous five nights unconscious in an intensive care unit at Beth Israel Medical Center's Singer Division [...]. *This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed*, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage, and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself. (6-7, my emphasis)

The text, then, can function as a site where the past can be recorded and/or processed. Joseph Brodsky, however, has argued that it is not so much that writers value or that they wish to understand their former lives that make them fixate on it, but rather because they want to "[delay] the arrival of the present"(106). Eschewing the reality of exile by getting lost in a fantasy world distinctly comes to the fore in Rousseau's previously invoked *Confessions*. Rousseau proves to be a particularly useful example in our case since he finds himself displaced on a number of accounts—not only is he exiled from his native Geneva but on his return there finds himself to be an outsider, excluded from his own culture. In addition, he suffers from self-alienation, as is evident when he recognises that "Two almost irreconcilable opposites are united within [him]" (110). Throughout his memoir Rousseau bemoans his disillusionment with the world, from which he escapes by immersing himself in a fantasy space:

> My troubled imagination did, however, find a way out of this curious situation, which saved me from myself and calmed my emergent sensuality. This was to dwell on situations that had appealed to me during my reading, to recall them, to vary and combine them, and to appropriate them in such a way that I became one of the characters I imagined and could envisage myself always in some role that was dear to my heart; I managed, in other words, to place myself in fictional situations that allowed me to forget the unhappiness of my real one. (40)

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[31] In "Exil in der Literatur: Zwischen Metapher und Realität" Elisabeth Bronfen postulates that the exiled party can use the text to make a coherent whole of his or her fragmented life.

Writers like Rousseau take recourse to dreaming up a new world in order to distance and protect themselves from the present,[32] exactly because these conjured-up spaces allow them the necessary leeway to imagine a different reality to the one they find themselves confronted with. Naturally, not all writers escape into the world of the text in order to avoid facing their discomfort. There *are* those, as Abdul JanMohamed has claimed, who use it as a platform to voice their critique of both the world they have left behind and the world of their present reality. Referring to writers who are neither at ease in their native country nor in their new home, JanMohamed argues that the "specular border intellectual" (97) feels trapped in a liminal space between different cultures. Further he posits that these writers carefully examine both societies, and that they "produce work that reflects (on) the gaps and that articulates their nature and structures" (114).[33]

That displacement is often traumatic and hardly ever fully assimilated can be gleaned from the preceding discussion. Paradoxically, however, theorists have pointed out that exile can also be stimulating. On this matter, Eva Hoffman has posited that in postmodernity, exile theory has placed an emphasis on what one might describe as the positive spin-offs of dislocation:

> […] there has grown up a vast body of commentary and theory that is rethinking and revising the concept of exile and the related contrapuntal concept of home […]. Exile used to be thought of as a difficult condition. It involves dislocation, disorientation, self-division. But today, at least within the framework of postmodern theory, we have come to value exactly those qualities of experience that exile demands—uncertainty, displacement, the fragmented identity. Within this conceptual framework, exile becomes, well, sexy, glamorous, interesting. (44)

As concerns not the theorist but the writer, Michael Seidel has concurred that exile need not be seen as only having a negative impact. Indeed, he suggests that the uncertainty and unease that come with exile can function as a creative force that fires the author's imagination (x-xi). According to Seidel, when confronted with the challenges of the unknown, the artist's mind is stimulated into accessing the pool of memories which stems from well-known terrain. What is more, when crossing from familiar into unfamiliar territory, these experiences are enhanced by the artist's flair for creativity (2-3). "At this juncture," he writes, "the creative mind is capable of a necessary recourse: projection images proximity, imagination reinforms, allegorizes, and enlivens material already assimilated; or, to put it another way, new accounts draw from funds already on deposit" (3).

Concerning the paradox of the exiled imagination, David Bevan has laconically remarked that "Both theorists and exiles themselves—of whatever kind—have long debated whether the

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[32] In *Home in Hollywood*, Elisabeth Bronfen argues that "fantasy work satisfies precisely because it produces protective fictions to ward off traumatic knowledge about the uncanniness that lies at the heart of all worldly emplacement" (25).

[33] The idea of a mirror echoing back and commenting on society brings to mind "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault's text on heterotopias. Considering the above, one might see exile narratives as a kind of heterotopia, which Foucault defines as "counter-sites […] in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (24).

experience is predominantly one that invigorates or mutilates" (4).[34] The double bind of artists in exile, in other words, is that they seem to be fuelled in their creativity by the (ostensibly undesired) situation in which they find themselves. In a paper entitled "Estrangement as Lifestyle: Shklovsky and Brodsky," Svetlana Boym differentiates between two kinds of nostalgic desire (241). The first type accentuates the initial part of the word (*nostos*) and advocates a going back home, while the second gives precedence to longing (*algia)*. According to Boym, this second type of nostalgia "accepts (if does not enjoy) the paradoxes of exile and displacement" (241). Translated into our context, writers in exile might be said to suffer from both types of nostalgia but it is because of the second type that their creativity is fueled.[35]

The autobiographical reader

As will become apparent in subsequent chapters, writers stimulated by exile and *algia* are able to produce life narratives which exploit the interrelatedness of the subject and the text so effectively that their experiences of displacement and unease are made palpable to the reader. The interaction between the reader, the writer and the text is, then, paramount to this study. Up to now, I have focused on the latter two entities. In this respect I pointed out how, in the late postmodern world, both the autobiographical self and the autobiographical text are marked by homelessness and uncertainty. I noted that they are generally regarded as neither belonging to any home—whether "home" refers to a place, a community, a family or a literary category—nor as knowing the ultimate truth about the self.

But the contention that the text and its subject do not belong and that they do not know is not entirely accurate. For what will transpire once I start analysing the narratives in greater detail is that neither the self nor his or her story simply constitutes one side of the binary opposition of "belonging/not belonging" and of "knowing/not knowing" but that they occupy a far more slippery slope. That is to say, the protagonists in the texts, though not completely at home in their world, are nonetheless *of* that world, which means that, at the same time, they are and are not at home. Or, to use the terminology of Richard Schechner, one might say

[34] On the matter of how displacement might fuel the artist's creativity, Roger Whitehouse has argued that the relationship is reciprocal. In the introduction to *Literary Expressions of Exile* he posits that "if exile shapes writing, providing it with subjects and themes, writing also shapes exile" (3).

[35] Of course, it should not be forgotten that my investigation pertains to *autobiographical* texts. Although the preceding discussion on the reasons for writing about exile has not been restricted to autobiography, the term "writers" has not been used to allude to any specific body of artists, nor to exclude compilers of memoirs. Indeed, the consequences of feeling out of place as well as the reasons cited for writing about dislocation seem to be, in light of the discussion on autobiography as exilic mode, even more valid for autobiographers than for novelists.

that while they are not at home they are not not at home.[36] In turn, the texts themselves are in a state of limbo—though they use a style of writing which conflates different literary and non-literary worlds and cannot be called autobiography in the conventional sense of the word, they are autobiographical in essence and intent so that they are simultaneously not autobiography and not not autobiography. Finally, since they do not give us the final truth about the subject and yet allow some part of the inner self to shimmer through, they are not not true.

It is this state of uncertainty and in-betweenness, not only as concerns the autobiographical subject but also the text, that has an alienating effect on the reader. Put another way, it is precisely the impossibility of emplacing life narratives and their subjects that foremost creates a sense of disorientation and unease in the world outside the text. To elucidate how the inability to classify people and things might lead to feelings of displacement, as well as to illustrate the interrelatedness between the writer, the reader and the text, I would like to return to the epigraph at the start of this chapter, and quote the passage from *Roland Barthes* in full:

> Any classification you read provokes a desire in you to put yourself into it somewhere: where is your place? At first you think you have found it; but gradually, like a disintegrating statue or eroding relief, its shape blurs and fades, or better still, like Harpo Marx losing his artificial beard in the glass of water he is drinking out of, you are no longer classifiable, not out of an excess of personality, but on the contrary because you pass all the fringes of the phantom, the specter: you unite in yourself supposedly distinctive features which henceforth no longer distinguish anything: you discover that you are at one and the same time (or alternatively) obsessive, hysterical, paranoiac, and perverse to the last degree (not to mention certain erotic psychoses), or that you sum up all the decadent philosophies: Epicureanism, eudaemonism, Asianism, Manichaeism, Pyrrhonism. (Barthes 143-144)

The notion evinced in the excerpt above that the subject is marked by his or her desire to categorically belong somewhere also comes to the fore in Julia Kristeva's aforementioned *Strangers to Ourselves*. Kristeva links not having an allotted place of one's own with feelings of estrangement when she writes that in his or her new home "the foreigner has no self" (8), and when she compares the space of the stranger to that of "a moving train, a plane in flight" (7-8). While Barthes and Kristeva are evidently using the above figures and tropes to refer to cultural experiences of displacement, it is the argument here that they apply equally well to the taxonomy of genres. Put another way, the sense of displacement and loss invoked by the image of the spectral onlooker or of the fast-moving train might be said to describe the

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[36] Here I am indebted to Lisbeth Larsson who brought the middle ground occupied by Life Writing in relation to Richard Schechner and his idea of "double negativity" (Schechner 111) during a lecture entitled "Virginia Woolf, Biographism and Life-Writing" given at the University of Zurich on 16 October 2012 (parts of Larsson's lecture were later published as "Virginia Woolf och biografin" in "*Det universella och det individuella": Det universella och det individuella". Festskrift till Eva Hættner Aurelius*). In *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, Schechner namely postulates that "While performing, a performer experiences his own self not directly but through the medium of experiencing the others. While performing, he no longer has a 'me' but has a 'not not me,' [...]. The way in which 'me' and 'not me,' the performer and the thing to be performed, are transformed into 'not me ... not not me' is through the workshop-rehearsal/ritual process" (111-112).

feelings the reader experiences when he or she is unable to categorically place a text on the literary map.

The idea that the reader is governed by the desire to emplace not only the self but also the text is corroborated by what Jacques Derrida writes in *The Law of Genre*. Admittedly, Derrida foremost focuses on the need to classify literary texts, and not the self. However, his claim is indirectly equivalent to my own, for Derrida takes the compulsion to emplace narratives as his premise and then goes on to argue that human nature also evinces the need to codify that which is external to the text (63-64). In this respect, Derrida posits that whenever it comes to sorting and categorising, we inevitably take recourse to some kind of codifying system. He writes that this not only holds true for identifying a written work as being of a particular genre, but that "Likewise, outside of literature or art, if one is bent on classifying, one should consult a set of identifiable and codifiable traits to determine whether this or that, such a thing or such an event belongs to this set or that class" (64).

What all of the above suggests is that, in order to feel grounded, individuals continuously try to classify not only themselves but also that which is external to their subject, including the narratives they read. What is more, if they fail to do so—i.e. if they are unable to either emplace themselves or the text—they are often left feeling lost and ill at ease. These feelings of disorientation and loss, as might have been gleaned from the foregoing discussion, are similar to those the exiled subject is made to experience. It is therefore my contention that autobiographical narratives, by virtue of their inherently shifty and exilic nature, are favourably placed not only to underline the alienated state of the subject but also to effectively bring it across. In cases such as these—when the text is used as a vehicle to palpably relay the self's sense of exile and malaise to the reader—the last link in the writer-text-reader triad is provided, the chain of communication is closed, and the alienating nature of autobiography is brought full circle.

Reflection

The way in which the uncertainty of the subject is conveyed to the reader by means of the text will be discussed in relation to the five works chosen for this study. In selecting these narratives, one of the most important criteria was then also the fact that, put together, they would present a range of innovative ways in which contemporary writers have utilised the shifty nature of the autobiographical genre in order to underscore the subject's experience of being caught between different worlds and between different truths, thereby superimposing their sense of displacement on that of the reader's. The other important feature of the selected texts is that they were all written roughly during the two decades that spanned the turn of the twenty-first century (1989-2008). The time frame is significant for it corroborates this thesis's argument that contemporary autobiography colludes with the way the postmodern world thinks about concepts such as "truth" and "home," as well as the notion

that the turn-of-the-century memoir boom produced texts which were groundbreaking in the way they used autobiography's shifty nature to write about exilic experiences.

Each of the following chapters, then, looks at a contemporary piece of life writing that appropriates the homelessness of the autobiographical genre to deal with displacement and uncertainty in a unique way. First on the bill of fare is Frank McCourt's polarizing memoir *Angela's Ashes*. Here attention is foremost paid to the way in which McCourt uses fiction, and fictional devices, to blur the borders between the concrete and the make-believe world. As the amalgamation of fact and fiction has led to widespread confusion among McCourt's readership, I argue that the text performs its own uncertainty. More precisely, by playing with readers' expectations of the autobiographical truth, I claim that *Angela's Ashes* makes us feel displaced and discontented, not unlike the diegetic subject himself who suffers malaise on account of his being geographically, culturally and familially dislocated.

From a life story that fictionalises the autobiographical I move, in Chapter 2, to fictional memoir that includes historical fact. In Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* the memoirs of two fictional Holocaust survivors stand in for life stories written by flesh-and-blood Jews whose journals were destroyed during World War II. Consequently I argue that Michaels's text illustrates the way in which the autobiographical genre might be utilised to bring the past back into the present. Further I contend that *Fugitive Pieces* not only reinstates the memoirs of those who perished in the Nazi genocide of the Jews but, by creating a murky interface between the fictional and the historical world as well as by having a constant clamour of silenced voices, it affectively involves readers in the trauma of exile and war—both as concerns the fictional and the real world.

In the chapter on Allon White's autobiographical fragment *Too Close to the Bone*, reader involvement is taken up a notch. For here we have a life writer who openly declares that the fluidity of the autobiographical genre might help him understand what is at the bottom of his alienation and unease, but that in this he needs the reader's help. While White duly plunges into a hybrid form of writing that sees him moving between different genres and worlds, and while this allows him to list a number of factors that might have contributed to his feelings of exile—including his environment, his guilty conscience, and his illness—it does not, however, bring him closer to understanding his self. Thus it is left up to the reader to work out what it is that White, owing to the close proximity he has to his self-narrative, cannot, and to help him locate the source of his malaise.

Significantly, in the penultimate chapter, the exact inverse is said to be the case: in Doris Lessing's auto/biographical narrative *Alfred & Emily* the reader is precisely not meant to notice the internal contradiction in the writer's claims and hence not supposed to see what is at the core of her displacement. In this respect I suggest that Lessing uses the life writing genre to create pathos and so win the reader's sympathy. More precisely, by utilising autobiography's shifty borders, Lessing manages to convey her feelings of displacement and malaise so effectively that readers are blinded to the fact that the reasons she purports to

have written a life narrative are not that which transpire once one starts to read between the lines. In short, while Lessing professes to write a hotchpotch of auto/biography and fiction in order to grapple with the past, I claim that she writes her story in order to be creative.

The final chapter is devoted to *Youth*, the second of three books that make up J.M. Coetzee's autobiographical omnibus *Scenes from Provincial Life*. As it marries fact and fiction, and as it comments on the shifty nature of autobiography writing, *Youth* calls to mind salient points made in previous chapters. While these are then also pointed out, attention is foremost paid to the book's self-referentiality, and the narrative is said to introduce a more complex understanding of life writing than so far encountered. To argue the point, the motility of the text is read in relation to the subject's movement between different cosmological spheres. More specifically, the protagonist's wavering between the routine of everyday life and the sublime world of art is mapped onto the way the text moves between earthly and divine realms. Not only is autobiography writing subsequently attributed greater freedom of movement but the reader's understanding of the ways in which a life narrative might juggle different worlds to foreground the uncertainty of both the autobiographical genre and the self is thereby simultaneously challenged and enhanced.

The five autobiographical pieces listed above exploit the interrelatedness of the subject and the text in order to make the protagonist's sense of displacement and unease palpable to the reader. Thus one might say that the writer, the reader and the text are united in and through exile. The level of complexity in the relationship between these three positions is reflected in the sequencing of the chapters: by gradually moving from McCourt to Coetzee, the texts become more multi-layered, the structure more complex, the conflation of truth and fiction more murky, and the borders between genres more difficult to discern. As these narratives become progressively performative, the reader is increasingly brought into play. Thus, whereas Frank McCourt "merely" achieves reader identification, Anne Michaels exhorts us to remember and even reproduce the past; while Allon White solicits the reader's assistance in helping him see his blind spots, Doris Lessing tricks us into not seeing how the past inspires her creativity. Reader production reaches an apex with *Youth* for here, ostensibly so that they might get closer to the truth, the reader is overtly given the run around. Hence the approach followed in this thesis is incremental, both in terms of narrative complexity as well as reader involvement and production.

The narratives, to summarise, bring to the fore the fact that the world we inhabit views the autobiographical self, the autobiographical text, and the autobiographical reader not as fixed but as malleable entities that question the notion of absolute certainty and ultimate truth. But while the subject matter in these stories reflects current existential concerns,[37] it is my

[37] This notion finds corroboration in *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, in which Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir contends that one of the reasons for autobiography's being so fashionable is that it "can capture and address many contemporary concerns, for example the status of the subject, the relations and representations of ethnicity and gender, and perhaps most importantly questions the individual's relationship with the past. Autobiographical writing can thereby reflect some of the main preoccupations of postmodernism […]" (1).

contention that their style of writing harks back to modernism. Earlier I invoked Max Saunders whose excellent study reveals the level of experimentation evinced in modernist autobiographies. As will become evident in the course of this thesis, much of what contemporary narratives do—such as vacillating between fact and fiction, writing (in) fragments instead of linear and complete texts, introducing third-person narrators and conflating different text types—originates from modernism and its innovative approaches to the autobiographical genre.[38] A significant detail to add is that many of the writers Saunders singles out as pioneers of modernist autobiography were namely writing in and/or about exile. These include works by authors such as Proust, who experienced social exclusion in his more immediate surroundings, as well as Joyce and Stein, both of whom were exiles in the material and the metaphorical sense of the word. That there is an undeniable link between exile and creativity has already been established, but at this point it seems apt to quote Terry Eagleton who has posited that "great art is produced, not from the simple availability of an alternative, but from the subtle and involuted tensions between the remembered and the real, the potential and the actual, integration and dispossession, exile and involvement" (*Exiles and Émigrés* 18). In the following chapters I argue that the close corroboration of exile and avant-garde autobiography writing, foremost encountered during modernism, has been repeated in recent years. More to the point, I suggest that at the same time that contemporary autobiographical texts implement modernist storytelling techniques to foreground the postmodern condition of uncertainty and homelessness, they also exemplify how innovation in the way of life writing often stands in close relationship with exile. In short, my contention is that if exile (in its broadest sense) is not *the* driving force behind innovative art, the conflicts between the "remembered and the real, the potential and the actual" have largely contributed to the creation of new forms of life writing, in the modernist period as well as in the contemporary moment.

[38] This does not mean that postmodern writing did not experiment with the autobiographical genre, but that the way in which contemporary life narratives play with the form is more reminiscent of modernism than of postmodernism. This is not only due to the fact that they implement narrative elements and mix fact and fiction but also that they blur the boundaries between the real and the invented. Significantly, this is different from postmodernism in which, according to Linda Hutcheon, there "is not really a blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction, but more a hybridizing mix, where the borders are kept clear, even if they are frequently crossed" (35).

Chapter 1

Truth and Lies in *Angela's Ashes*: The Scoop on Frank McCourt

> When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.
>
> — James Joyce*, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

If *Angela's Ashes* is not to be regarded as a return to the modern as such, Irish literary scholars would certainly agree that, at the least, it is a return to James Joyce. James Phelan for example has maintained that "one of the important precursor texts for *Angela's Ashes* is *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*" (75) and Peter Lenz that "the protagonist's psychological development calls to the reader's mind several parallels from Joyce's autobiographical novel" (412). To be sure, they are not identical—while Lenz argues that in *Angela's Ashes* precedence is given to childlike narration over artistic sophistication (412), Phelan posits that McCourt uses different literary devices from Joyce to depict the maturation of the subject (76). In addition to drawing parallels with Joyce in particular, theorists have claimed that McCourt's writing features elements of the Irish literary tradition in general. This includes the way in which "McCourt employs syntactical and idiomatic elements of Anglo-Irish writing" (Lenz 411) as well as the fact that he portrays "stereotypical Irish characters and the woes that beset them" (Mitchell 615).

While it clearly lies beyond the scope of this thesis to analyse the various ways in which McCourt has perpetuated the Irish narrative tradition at large, I would like to say something more about the similarities between *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Angela's Ashes*, especially in the light of my claim that contemporary autobiographical works tap into narrative elements and themes symptomatic of modernism. In the previous chapter the features that autobiography written today share with that of modernism were discussed in detail. Of these, oscillating between fact and fiction and writing about exile are not only most pertinent for the purposes of my argument but also manifest in both *Portrait* and *Angela's Ashes*. Comparing these narratives reveals how the interplay of the real and the fictitious conveys the protagonists' sense of displacement. It also brings to the fore the fact that both authors went into voluntary exile, Joyce leaving Ireland for continental Europe and McCourt seeking his fortunes in America. A further analogy that can be made, and which is of greater significance than the condition itself, is the *effect* exile had on these artists and their work.

Both Joyce and McCourt, it seems, drew inspiration from the places they grew up in and used it as the main source for their writing. Martin Tucker for one has argued that "in his new surroundings in the metropolis [the colonized writer] gains strength from his memory of what he has fled, and he uses material of early life for the substance of his work" (xx). As an example he mentions Joyce: "[this] pattern is suggestive of James Joyce who, adopting the creed of silence, exile, and cunning, wandered through Europe but never forsook the land of his birth" (xx).

Because memories of their youth are stimulated by the condition of exile it appears only natural that authors like Joyce and McCourt will write about their home. *Angela's Ashes* is an exemplar of letting the home you leave behind be the inspiration for your writing. Such was the extent to which he was fueled by the memory of what he had left behind that McCourt, a late starter, shot to fame and fortune at the age of 66. The book enjoyed tremendous success, both in public and literary circles. It was on the *New York Times* Best-Seller list for more than two years and won numerous prizes including the Pulitzer Prize for Biography/ Autobiography and the National Book Critics Circle Award (Mitchell 608). In 1999 it was made into a feature film directed by Alan Parker, and by February 2014 it had, according to Heather Greenwood Davis, sold "tens of millions of copies and [had been] translated into more than 30 languages" (par. 3).[1]

As intimated before, this immensely popular book was not only written in but also about exile. Subtitled *A Memoir of a Childhood*, it is a recollection of the author's years of growing up with a despairing mother, a mostly inebriated father and six scabby-kneed siblings in the Ireland of the nineteen thirties and forties. Frank McCourt's story begins (for all intents and purposes)[2] in New York in 1930, the year of his birth. This is where his Irish parents have emigrated to in the hope of a better future, and where the protagonist spends the first four years of his life. But the constant struggle to get by financially, combined with the tragic death of Frankie's baby sister Margaret, leads to the family's returning to Ireland. While life in Brooklyn was marked by hardship, back in Limerick the situation is hopeless. Malachy McCourt, Frankie's father, drinks up most of their income and finally deserts them for good, leaving his mother, Angela, to eke out an existence for her family by relying on charity and favours. Frank's twin brothers Oliver and Eugene die in short succession of each other, while the remaining four children (Frank, Malachy, Michael and Alphie) have to fight to survive in a town rife with squalor, disease and abject poverty. To make matters worse, Frank comes up against self-righteous Catholicism, a tyrannical school system and other forms of the establishment. The only thought that keeps him going is that he will get out of Limerick one day and go back to America where he came from.

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[1] As concerns the impact the text has had, Abdullahi Osman El-Tom remarks that *Angela's Ashes* "has been given almost mythical importance by equating the author with Charles Dickens" (78). He goes on, however, to argue that "A rigorous critique of a book like McCourt's is necessitated by its power within modern literary discourse" as it is "steeped in racist discourse that has so far gone uncontested" (78).

[2] Although there is analepsis when, after a very short introduction, we are given an account of why Frank's parents are wed, this is almost as brief as their courtship, and takes up but seven of the four hundred-odd pages (2-8).

It is not difficult to see why Frank feels so driven towards leaving. Right from the start, Limerick is portrayed as a place where he is treated like an outcast because of the way he speaks, looks, thinks and acts, and where he is subjected to poverty, hunger, disease, inclement weather, bad parenting and the hypocrisy and absolute power of state institutions. Thus it is a place which fails to meet his material and emotional needs and which leads to self-doubt and a crisis in identity. As such, it is a place that leaves him no choice but to leave. And where else would he go if not to America? It is, after all, the home of James Cagney (120), Duke Ellington (319-320), Billie Holiday (320) and Joe Louis (344), the land of opportunity where all one's dreams can come true.

Coming back to the idea that artists in exile draw on their earlier experiences, it is not difficult to see why McCourt would have plenty to write about in his childhood memoir or why Limerick and Ireland would be ever-present in his work. George O'Brien has claimed that "Joyce was a committed exile (inasmuch as he remained abroad), but psychically he never left Dublin" ("The Muse of Exile" 82); in this chapter I argue that McCourt never "psychically" leaves Limerick either. I moreover suggest that it is *because* he feels out of place there (and not in spite thereof) that he decides to turn his memories into memoir. That is, I claim that his familial, social and political milieu make him feel like an outsider amongst his own people and that together they ultimately provide the impetus for leaving Ireland. At the same time, I posit that McCourt uses the text as an instrument to convey these feelings of displacement and unease. My contention, in short, is that by conflating the factual with the fictitious in two distinct ways, McCourt manages to cast into doubt the status of his work as autobiography. More precisely, by embellishing events as well as by implementing narrative techniques widely associated with novels, McCourt disconcerts and unsettles his readers, thereby palpably transmitting his feelings of homelessness and malaise.

In order to analyse the relation between the shiftiness of the text and the protagonist's dislocation, I first delve deeper into the nature of McCourt's exile. I consider why he feels pressed to leave Ireland and subsequently ask how voluntary his exile really is. I look at how his surroundings—including his deplorable social circumstances, his family, the state, and the community at large—make him resolute to break free, and analyse the reasons he is so set on going specifically to the United States. I end off with a (very brief) look at his life after finally arriving in New York in 1949, and try to ascertain to what degree America manages to live up to his expectations.

Angela & Malachy

Frank's relationship with his parents is complex, not least of all because he feels ambivalent towards them. On the one hand, he realises that they are not completely without virtue; his father is a kind-hearted, jovial man and his mother committed to her family. In general, however, Angela and Malachy are shown to be incapable of taking care of their children's physical needs, a circumstance which necessitates Frankie to systematically take over the

responsibility for his siblings. Not surprisingly, as the story moves forward, we see the relationship between the narrator and his parents deteriorate until the ties between them all but disappear.

Frankie's father is a puzzle to him. On the one hand, he is the one who instills in Frank a love for storytelling, which is significant not only because this is how McCourt makes his riches in the end but also because it reminds him of the intimate moments they shared when he was younger. One of the fondest memories Frank has is of his father putting him on his lap, letting him have some of his tea and telling him about Cuchulain. There are also other brief moments of bonding such as when Frankie is in hospital with typhoid fever and Malachy openly displays affection for him. His overriding image, however, is that of a failing father who regularly comes home intoxicated, wakes up the boys and bribes them with a penny if they pledge their allegiance to Ireland.[3] Worse than being robbed of one's sleep, however, is being deprived of one's livelihood, a circumstance Malachy single-handedly achieves by wasting away any money the family might come into. We see Frank struggling to understand the different sides of his father when the narrator, speaking in the voice of his eleven-year old self, sums up his ambivalent feelings about his dad as follows:

> I think my father is like the Holy Trinity with three people in him, the one in the morning with the paper, the one at night with the stories and the prayers, and then the one who does the bad thing and comes home with the smell of whiskey and wants us to die for Ireland. (239)

Though he only articulates these feelings more than half-way through the book, Frankie is aware of his father "[doing] the bad thing" (239) from a very young age. A case in point is when Oliver dies and Frank and his dad roam the streets of Limerick in search of food for the rest of the family who are waiting back home for them to return. But when Pa Keating (Frank's uncle) invites Malachy for a drink, the other children are quickly forgotten. Despite his young age it is the child-protagonist (and not any of the grown-ups) who realises that what they are doing is wrong:

> There are men sitting in this pub with great glasses of black stuff before them. Uncle Pa Keating and Dad have the black stuff, too. They lift their glasses carefully and slowly drink. There is creamy white stuff on their lips, which they lick with little sighs. Uncle Pa gets me a bottle of lemonade and Dad gives me a piece of bread and I don't feel hungry anymore. Still, I wonder how long we'll sit here with Malachy and Eugene hungry at home, hours from the porridge, which Eugene didn't eat anyway. (78)

This type of role reversal, with Frankie instead of Malachy playing the part of the sensible adult, is a pattern we see throughout the book. A half a year after the episode described above, Eugene also dies and on the day of his funeral Frank's dad simply disappears. Frankie

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[3] Beverly Matiko observes that there are more than half a dozen instances in the narrative that describe this sequence of events. As such, "They underscore the poverty and futility circumscribing the McCourt family's existence, and they acquire the status of ritual" (290). Consequently, when Frankie and Malachy one night refuse the penny, it "signals their rejection of their father, his values, beliefs, and rituals" (295).

is subsequently sent to scour the pubs of Limerick, locate Malachy and haul him home. When he eventually tracks him down in a bar and sees Eugene's coffin being used as a tabletop for drinks, he threatens to tell his mother and refuses to go home alone. While Frankie thus merely observed his father's inappropriate behaviour when Oliver died, this time he acts on his conscience. As Frank grows older and takes on more responsibility, he becomes increasingly critical of his father's drinking habits and more vocal in his disapproval. This is neatly illustrated in an incident which takes place a few years on and which marks the breakdown in the relationship between father and son. Eleven-year-old Frankie goes to the train station with his mother to fetch his dad who is on his way home from England where he has found work. When he doesn't show, Frankie says to his mother, "He doesn't care about us. He's just drunk over there in England" (312).[4] Frank is right and wrong about his dad, because just one day later he shows up at home—albeit with a bruised face, no upper teeth and, unsurprisingly, an empty pocket. By this stage the family are unanimous in condemning Malachy for drinking up all the money. By chanting "You drank the money, Dad" (313) Frankie and his brothers, as Beverly Matiko has rightly noted, "in effect issue their emancipation proclamation" (296). Faced with such hostility, Malachy leaves the very same day to go back to England. This is the last time he features in the narrative, and as we see him physically vanishing off the pages of the book he also disappears out of Frank's life.

Malachy's absconding has far-reaching consequences; it means that Angela has to try and raise the boys on her own and it also means that Frank is now "the man of the house" (249). He feels duly responsible for his family, and when he lands a job delivering coal, he wishes he could leave school and do this forever so that his mother would never have to go begging again. A witness to her hardship, he understandably feels protective over her. He sees her struggling with his father's drinking problem, fretting about her children, standing in queues and being publicly humiliated in order to get financial help from the government. Frankie is also sensitive enough to realise that his mother cannot turn to her immediate family for help. His grandmother, whose own husband defected to Australia in an ironic case of repetition compulsion,[5] only ever lends a hand begrudgingly. His mother's siblings are equally tight-fisted and dour. While her brother, Ab Sheehan, is uncharitable to the extent of literally hiding food from Frankie, her sister Aggie only rarely shows a sense of obligation towards the McCourts (the time Angela is in hospital and Aggie reluctantly takes care of the children being one such an occasion).

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[4] Little wonder, then, that in his family romance Frankie fantasises at different stages that Uncle Pa Keating, Mr. Hannon and even "the man in the signal tower who gives you sandwiches and cocoa" (312) might be his father. I discuss Freud's notion of family romances in detail in Chapter 4.

[5] In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud writes that "[the neurotic patient] is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of [...] *remembering* it as something belonging to the past" (18, emphasis original). In McCourt's narrative, his mother is deserted by his father in the same way that his grandmother was abandoned by his grandfather, i.e. the experience of being left behind is (unwillingly and unwittingly) repeated.

All this is to say that Frank does not blame his mother for their predicament. This does not mean, however, that she is without shortcomings, of which burdening her oldest son with her problems (both marital and monetary) is most obvious. From a very tender age, Frankie is aware of their financial dilemma and of his father's improper conduct. In fact, the children are so clear on what their mother expects them to do whenever their father "does the bad thing and comes home with the smell of whiskey" (239) that on these occasions they refuse to speak to him or allow him to pick them up. As the eldest, Frank is more exposed to what's going on and more directly involved in his parents' fights than his brothers. When Malachy disappears with the money his parents sent for Alphie's christening, it is Frankie who is commissioned to go and look for his father, read him the riot act and disgrace him in front of all the other men in the bar. But when Frank finally manages to track him down he feels torn between his mother and father, and while "all [he] can think of doing is running in and giving [his dad] a good kick in the leg and running out again" (209), in the end he decides to "go home and tell [his] mother a lie that [he] never saw him couldn't find him" (209).

But burdening Frankie with her grown-up problems, inappropriate as they may be, is probably not completely out of the ordinary, and certainly not what ultimately alienates mother and child. Rather, what delivers the final blow to their relationship is a succession of two events. First, Frank espies his mother asking for alms at the Redemptorist church. In Frank's eyes, although they are poor, they have never sunk that low. To him there is a difference between accepting institutionalised charity and openly begging alongside other destitute people. He feels ashamed and deeply embarrassed and he only returns home reluctantly. But there are worse things than being a beggar, as Frank finds out when they move in with Laman Griffin, Angela's cousin. That Angela provides Laman with sexual favours in exchange for a roof over their heads is something thirteen-year-old Frank has learned to live with during the course of their stay there. But one day he has a fall-out with Laman, and instead of shunning him as Frank thought she would, his mother decides to appease her cousin sexually. Frank is horrified and he can no longer stay in the same house. When he finally confronts his mother with the incident, it is the first time ever that he talks back to her. The situation escalates and it ends with him striking her and going to live with his uncle Ab until he sets out for America. This episode with Laman is *the* event that drives Frank from his mother's home for good, and thus also marks the first real break between them.

Considering the above, one can say that Frank is (prematurely) pushed out of his childhood home by a father who drinks away his responsibility and a mother so desperate she uses sex as a means of payment. This estrangement from his parents, coupled with the subsequent burden of taking care of his family, has an important role to play in Frank's decision to go to America. Not only are there fewer ties that keep him in Ireland, but he believes going away will enable him to take care of those he leaves behind. Once across the

Atlantic, he tells us, "I'll be a rich Yank and send home hundreds of dollars and my family will never have to worry [...] again" (390).

Getting "Oush of ish"[6]

In addition to familial alienation, Frank is induced to leave Limerick by the the difficult social circumstances he grows up in. From the very first sentence it is clear that the main theme of his memoir will be exile, and that the reasons for wanting to escape are directly related to his immediate surroundings:

> My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born. Instead, they returned to Ireland when I was four [...].
> When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. [...].
> [...] the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years.
> *Above all—we were wet.*
> Out in the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly up the River Shannon and settle forever in Limerick. The rain dampened the city from the Feast of Circumcision to New Year's Eve. It created a cacophony of hacking coughs, bronchial rattles, asthmatic wheezes, consumptive croaks. It turned noses into fountains, lungs into bacterial sponges. (1, my emphasis)

Of the many shortcomings pertaining to his upbringing, including inadequate parenting, indigence, Catholicism, and the legacy of colonialism, McCourt singles out the rainy weather in Limerick as the most unbearable circumstance. Obviously, this notion has nothing to do with the instance of the meteorological phenomenon per se. Rather, it is so abominable because it is seemingly in collusion with other adverse conditions such as hunger, disease and poverty, all of which work together to make growing up in Limerick complete and utter misery. Of these, not having enough money is afforded most attention in the text, for the McCourts are so wretchedly poor that they cannot meet even their most basic needs. Food is a scarcity in the house and the children never have enough to eat. They live on tea, bread and the occasional pig's head for Christmas dinner, and they literally have to beg, steal and borrow to survive at all.

In addition to being food-deprived, Frank and his brothers are always cold and wet, and this not just because of the rain. The only clothes they have to keep them warm is a single pair of tattered shoes each (courtesy of St. Vincent de Paul Society) and a few rags which they wear when they go to school and to bed. They have neither blankets nor towels, neither a raincoat nor an umbrella. When it rains, they get wet and stay wet. Even once inside there is little chance of warming up and fending off illnesses because, as a rule, there is not enough money for coal to make a fire. To make matters worse, their lodgings are poorly insulated, so that the cold, wet weather infiltrates the building and diseases take hold. The house they have in Roden Lane is a chilling example; it is situated next to a rat-infested shed and a toilet used

[6] McCourt, *Angela's Ashes* 350

by all of the families in the lane. In winter the walls are constantly damp and the ground floor regularly flooded so that the family is confined to the two rooms on the upper level. Of the fact that such conditions are conducive to diseases and ultimately to catching one's death, everyone is well aware. While Frank's dad wants to "get out of Limerick and far from the Shannon that kills" (102), the English-born Mr. Harrington (whose Irish wife dies of tuberculosis) sees the illness as endemic to Ireland and calls the Irish a "Race of ghouls" (383). The locals are equally critical of their town: we are told that Limerick "is the capital city of the weak chest and the weak chest leads to the consumption" (61). Further it is a place where people either die young or which they leave at a young age for "there's nothing here but rain and oul' biddies saying the rosary" (70). It is moreover a town where entire families are killed off. When he is nine, Frankie tells us about his playmate Mickey Spellacy's "whose relations are dropping one by one of the galloping consumption" (192) before Mickey too dies of tuberculosis. Frank's family is not spared either; his twin brothers, his grandmother, his uncle Tom and his aunt Jane all die of pneumonic-related illnesses.

The "galloping consumption" (192), the malnutrition, the rain, as well as the lack of warm clothes and decent housing all join forces to make Limerick a most undesirable and life-threatening place to live. Frank's need to escape his surroundings, then, has to do foremost with a physical need to survive. But the town's material shortcomings are not the only things that drive him away—Frank also feels compelled to leave owing to the prevailing mentality which he fails to underscore or even understand, and from which he feels excluded. When he arrives in Ireland for the first time from America he is four years old. Limerick, and the way they do things there, is a mystery to him. It is a place where men regularly drink themselves into oblivion, where working-class men are idle and working-class women spend their lives having babies, where old wives' tales and ignorance are rife, where a man showing affection is frowned upon, where neighbours have ridiculous and long-standing feuds, where belonging to the wrong class closes doors on you, where you are required to die for your country and your church.

Despite the fact that he fails to comprehend their mindset, Frankie seems (initially at least) resolute to fit in with the town and its people. He subsequently expresses his desire to belong to the group, such as when he tells us that he wants to "get [his] wages every Friday, go to the pictures on Saturday nights like everyone" (337), and that he "[wants] to be ordinary" (386). He knows, however, that being poor and dirty and having bad teeth and pussy eyes prevents him from really belonging to the community, as he is regularly reminded of at school when the other boys tease him and call him "Blinky McCourt beggar woman's son scabby-eyed blubber gob dancing Jap" (303). He is then also extremely self-conscious about his physical appearance; when he is fourteen and looks at himself in his grandmother's mirror, this is how he describes what he sees:

> Everything is torn, shirt, gansey, short pants, stockings, and my shoes are ready to fall off my feet entirely. […]. If my clothes are bad I'm worse. No matter how I drench my hair

> under the tap it sticks out in all directions. […]. My eyes are red and oozing yellow, there are matching red and yellow pimples all over my face and my front teeth are so black with rot I'll never be able to smile in my life.
> I have no shoulders and I know the whole world admires shoulders. When a man dies in Limerick the women always say, Grand man he was, shoulders that big and wide he wouldn't come in the door for you, had to come in sideways. When I die they'll say, Poor little devil, died without a sign of a shoulder. (356)

His physical shortcomings and his working-class background, then, are viewed as obstacles to becoming a rightful citizen of Limerick. Added to that, Limerick men and women seem to go out of their way to exclude Frank and make him feel inadequate. Accordingly, he is labelled a foreigner on two separate grounds. First, he is different from the other kids at school because of his New York accent. He and his brothers "sound like bloody fillum stars" (52) and they are branded "a crowd of Yanks" (75) who have come "from the sinful shores of Amerikay" (134). Second, he is constantly made aware of his status as outsider because of the likeness to his dad, a Presbyterian from Northern Ireland. When his grandmother says that he has "the odd manner like his father" (194), she is effectively saying that like his dad he does not belong in Limerick. As for Malachy, he is categorically ostracised when his particular Irish accent makes it hard for him to find work. The disregard is mutual, though, for Malachy refuses "to talk like a Limerickman" (102) and laments "that his sons are now afflicted with the Limerick accent" (102). When he complains to Angela that "[he doesn't want his] sons growing up in a Limerick lane saying, Oush of ish" (350), his wife retorts, "I hope it keeps fine for you but you're not doing much to get us oush of ish" (350). Here any resemblance between father and son stops, of course, because what Frank does in the end is to get out of it, and indeed "oush of ish" (350), by saving up enough money and by taking the first opportunity to leave Limerick.

In his essay "The predicament of individuality in *Angela's Ashes*" Eric Levy argues that "the lanes of Limerick are dominated by a mentality equipped to discourage individuality and encourage conformity [and by] a reflex to humiliate, exclude or persecute the individual who refuses to adhere to the preferences of the group or other individuals" (par. 5). Not being Catholic, or not having enough money to take care of your family, are some forms of "behaviour […] deemed unacceptable or incorrigible" (par. 5). In Frank's case, being poor and having an outsider as a father excludes him from the group. Though initially determined to fit in, he gradually realises—as I will presently show—that he will never feel completely at home among his own people. In consequence he starts to dream about America where he hopes to escape the poverty, the rain, the hunger, the mentality, the exclusion, and the labelling. Here he hopes to make a lot of money and fix some of his physical failings so that, as Uncle Pa predicted, he might return to Limerick "with a new suit and fat on his bones like any Yank

and a lovely girl with white teeth hangin' from his arm" (420). Accordingly, he will be admired everywhere he goes, and Limerick will have a citizen they can be proud of.[7]

The state

Angela's Ashes, as James Phelan has rightly pointed out, is "a combination of memoir and Bildungsroman" (75). While I discuss the text's status as memoir in detail later on, in this section I want to focus on how, as a coming of age narrative, it depicts the steps Frank has to take to gain self-knowledge and establish his place in the world.[8] In this respect I argue that, at first, Frank wants to believe that his place in the world is where he physically happens to find himself; that is, he initially wants to accept his interpellation as quintessential Irishman.[9] But because he feels out of place as far as his community as well as its ideology is concerned, he effectively can *not*. Realising that he is unable to respond to his interpellation, he decides to leave. Finally, it is by acting on this realisation that he recognises his identity and effectively reaches adulthood.

But before he displays due cognisance and becomes a mature subject, Frank goes through a phase in which he feels pressured into accepting his symbolic place in the community. This, he believes, requires being a morally excellent person and devout Catholic. Consequently he fears that if his soul is tainted with sin he will be considered an outcast and will never be allowed to take his rightful place in society. He is concerned that his transgressions might be so great that he will be unable to take First Communion and get absolution, a circumstance which will see him "disgraced all over Limerick and doomed to hell tormented forever by devils" (140). Despite a concerted effort to be without blemish, however, he finds it virtually impossible to follow the Church's teachings. He knows, for example, that it is a grievous sin in the eyes of the Church to do "Dirty Things in General" (340), but even if Mother Mary herself "weeps when she [...] beholds in horror the spectacle of Limerick boys defiling themselves" (340), Frank does not stop masturbating. For fear of ending up in hell, he "[prays] to the Virgin Mary and tells her [he's] sorry [he] put her Son back on the cross" (341). He wants to confess but "The priests of Limerick [...] hiss that [he's] not in a proper spirit of repentance" (341). As a result, he tells us "[he goes] from church to church looking for an easy priest till Paddy Clohessy tells [him] there's one in the Dominican church who's ninety years old and deaf as a turnip" (341).

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[7] However, when this fantasy is finally enacted in *'Tis,* Frank realises that "the whole world knows I'm not a real American GI, that I'm just someone from the back lanes of Limerick all togged out in the American uniform with the corporal's stripes" (136).

[8] According to M.H. Abrams, the Bildungsroman deals with "the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences—and usually through a spiritual crisis—into maturity and the recognition of his or her identity and role in the world" (119-120).

[9] In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser famously writes that "ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation [...] called *interpellation* or hailing [...]" (174, emphasis original).

Throughout the narrative, Frank conveys his perplexity about the Church's hypocrisy and his subsequent failure to feel at home there. However, there are times when he imagines that he would like to be a part of their community. A case in point is when Frankie dreams of becoming a Jesuit in spite of the fact that the Church rejects him on two occasions (they want him neither as an altar boy nor in their Christian Bothers' School). At this juncture, the author uses his younger self as seemingly naive focaliser and indulges in satire to comment on the sanctimoniousness of the Church:

> I'd like to be a Jesuit some day but there's no hope of that when you grow up in a lane. Jesuits are very particular. They don't like poor people. They like people with motor cars who stick out their little fingers when they pick up their teacups. (281)

Writing his story half a century after the events took place enables McCourt to use satire to send up the Church and to convey his incomprehension for its teachings. But the protagonist in the text does not have the benefit of hindsight and we can see him torn between wanting to be a part of the Church and noticing its blatant flaws. Nowhere is this illustrated better than when he takes First Communion, for the whole event is undermined by comedy and farce. First, the wafer gets lodged in Frankie's palate. He tells us, however, that in the end "God was good. He melted and I swallowed Him and now, at last, I was a member of the True Church, an official sinner" (142). But Frankie's relief is short-lived since God is jettisoned when Frank soon after vomits out his First Communion breakfast. He is subsequently made to go to church to confess and there is another farcical moment when he tells the priest, "Grandma says she has God in her backyard and what should she do" (143). This physical disgorging of First Communion is metaphorical of Frank's rejection of the Church; put another way, his body resisting the food representative of communion with Christ is a trope for refusing to accept his place within the Church.

A crisis in cultural interpellation means not only rejecting the Church but also feeling out of place among its parishioners. The narrator relates several incidents in which the lack of compassion in ostensibly God-fearing citizens leaves him nonplussed. In addition to the priests and teachers, it is the ordinary citizens that are presented as perverted in their zeal. He fails to understand, for instance, how his grandmother and his aunt Aggie can be so tight-fisted and reluctant to help their own flesh and blood while at the same time being devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which he describes as "a picture […] with blood dripping from it, flames erupting all around it and on top a nasty-looking crown of thorns" (142). But Grandma Sheehan and Aggie are not the only ones who seemingly miss the point about Christian charity, as is evident when the children go imploring the rich to give them food and the maids chase them away:

> We push the pram out to the rich avenues and roads but when we knock on the doors the maids tell us go away or they'll call the proper authorities and it's a disgrace to be dragging a baby around in a wreck of a pram that smells to the heavens a filthy contraption that you wouldn't use to haul a pig to the slaughterhouse and this is a

> Catholic country where babies should be cherished and kept alive to hand down the faith from generation to generation. (273-274)

The influence of the Church is obviously vast and it becomes clear in the text that it manages to impart its doctrine to the citizens of Limerick through state-owned institutions. "Hospitals and schools," Frankie tells us, are places that "always tell you what to do" (243). This of course calls to mind Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1971). According to Althusser, "in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce" (128). These include reduplicating that which is needed for the production process, such as materials and machinery, but also a trained workforce. Workers, in turn, are produced outside the workplace—whether it be in the school or other forms of the establishment (128-134). What is more, schools are not only places of erudition but also where young people are taught "respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination" (132). This means that "the school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the master of its 'practice'" (133, emphasis original).

In *Angela's Ashes*, the school is shown to conspire with the church in wielding its power and its ideology. It is here that young people learn "to prepare for First Confession and First Communion, to know and remember all the questions and answers in the catechism, to become good Catholics, to know the difference between right and wrong, to die for the Faith if called on" (124). The school system is portrayed in such a way that it is clear why Frank is unable to answer to its interpellation. To start with, corporal punishment is the default means to discipline students if they talk, if they laugh, if they are late or if they don't know the answer. The school masters tell the boys they are worthless, and that hell and damnation await them should they step out of line. Concomitantly, it is a system which prohibits independent thought; instead of fostering inquisitive minds, the boys are made to recite their lessons in chorus. Even when ostensibly transmitting knowledge, the methodology is one of indoctrination and dogma. One example is when a school master tries to impart his enthusiasm for Euclid to the class, but in the end only succeeds in creating drones:

> Without Euclid the Messerschmitt could never have taken to the sky. Without Euclid the Spitfire could not dart from cloud to cloud. Euclid brings us grace and beauty and elegance. What does he bring us, boys?
> Grace, sir.
> And?
> Beauty, sir.
> And?
> Elegance, sir.
> Euclid is complete in himself and divine in application. Do you understand that, boys?
> We do, sir. (170)

McCourt's disapproval of the school system he is subjected to comes to the fore in *Teacher Man* (the final part of his autobiographical trilogy). The way McCourt teaches in New York is in direct contrast to his own education. Instead of using a cane and demeaning his students, he gains their interest with his sense of humour, by telling them stories of his own life and by using unorthodox teaching methods. He tells us, "I was not cut out to be the purposeful kind of teacher who brushed aside all questions […] to get on with the well-planned lesson. That would have reminded me of that school in Limerick where the lesson was king and we were nothing" (24). In an interview with Carolyn Hughes in *Poets and Writers* he accordingly affirms that the masters at his old school "had about as light a touch as the Marquis de Sade" (24). According to Hughes, "When McCourt became a teacher himself, he was determined to provide a creative, productive environment for his students" (24).

In *Angela's Ashes* McCourt portrays the state as domineering and all-powerful, and it is plain to see why it is difficult for him to accept his symbolic role in society. We understand why he needs to go away, why he divorces himself from the Catholic church,[10] and why he finally implements completely different educational methods from those used by his own teachers. This begs the question how voluntary McCourt's exile really was. Paul Ilie's thoughts on the similarities between the effects of enforced and self-imposed exile are instructive in this matter. Ilie namely claims that "Both the act of driving out a fellow man and the private unrest that drives man to emigrate are jointly ingrained, it would appear, from the inception and in the *vital constitution of certain societies*" (1, my emphasis). Exile, says Ilie, "is a mental condition more than a material one […] a state of mind" (2) which sets in when subjects recognise that they do not share in the belief system of those around them. Hence, to Ilie, "a citizen can experience disaffection from the majority even while dwelling in its midst" (2).

In light of the above, it can be argued that although his exile can strictly be classified as voluntary, Frank is not left with much of a choice in the matter, for, as Peter Lenz has noted, "to Frank […] *Ireland* was exile" (418, emphasis original). His social surroundings, for one, compel him to get out: his mother's desperate deeds of self-sacrifice and his father's alcoholism drive him from their home and out onto the street. He further has to contend with the miseries of growing up in an area where poverty, hunger and disease roam and where he is treated like an outcast. Added to that, the state is accredited with hypocrisy and unrestrained power, an ideology Frank cannot endorse. In spite of these trying circumstances, we have witnessed Frank attempting—*but failing*—to accept his place within society. Though it takes him the best of nineteen years, in the end he reaches maturity

[10] In *Teacher Man* McCourt confesses, "I wasn't put on this earth to be Catholic or Irish or vegetarian or anything" (195), but Peter Duffy writes in *The Wall Street Journal* that the author had an ambivalent stance toward the Church. Though there is no doubt that he was "one of the church's principal public antagonists" (par. 4), "when he stood before Pope John Paul II in 2002 […] the little Irish-Catholic boy in him took over. He knelt, took the pontiff's hand and kissed his ring" (par. 11). On this matter, writes Duffy, McCourt has said, "[The Pope] knew what a fraud and a phony I was. […]. And I have to admit, as turbulent as my relationship with the church has been […] I was walking on water practically. I was walking on air" (par. 12).

precisely by realising that he cannot respond to his hailing by the existing ideology. Finally, by leaving Ireland and by breaking with his community and its institutions of power, he actually performs his refusal of cultural interpellation and concurrently enacts his rite de passage.

America

Due to social and economic pressures Frankie sets his heart, and his hopes, on America. "Day and night [he dreams]" (415) about going there, a desire that becomes increasingly stronger as the narrative nears its end. Accordingly he declares that "if [he] can't go to America [he] might as well jump into the river Shannon" (349). So determined is he not to be trapped in Limerick and to build up his "escape money to America" (390) that he avers, "If my whole family dropped from the hunger I wouldn't touch this money in the post office [account]" (390). By the same reasoning, he steals food and stationery as this enables him to do his job and earn wages as a telegram boy and letter-writer respectively. From Mrs. Finucane, for whom he works as a letter-writer, he takes money on the sly, first bit by bit while she is still alive and then, when she suddenly dies and Frank finds her "in the chair, her eyes wide open, and her purse on the floor wide open" (416), a lump sum so that he will have enough money to go to New York.

Frank then is determined to go to America; worth looking at is why he singles out the States as *the* place to escape to. Firstly, it is the country he is born and where he spends the first four years of his life. Although he realises that times in Brooklyn were tough, he has the feeling that they were far better off there than in Limerick. The country's imperfections seem to have become very vague with the passing of time, and the impression Frank has of the US is that everyone there is contented, that "no one has a care in the world" (422). He loves everything about what he *thinks* Americans are, even the way they sound. When listening to the radio at Mrs. Purcell's, he says:

> [...] it's lovely to hear the American voices easy and cool and here is the music, oh, man, the music of Duke Ellington himself telling me take the A train to where Billie Holiday sings only to me,
>
> *I can't give you anything but love, baby.*
> *That's the only thing I've plenty of, baby.*
>
> Oh, Billie, Billie, I want to be in America with you and all that music, where no one has bad teeth, people leave food on their plates, every family has a lavatory, and everyone lives happily ever after. (319-320, italics original)

From the above passage it can be gleaned that the image Frankie has of the United States is not only based on his own recollections but also shaped by outside influences such as the radio. It is, however, the Hollywood movie industry that especially constitutes the mental picture he has of America. Whenever there is some money to spare, Frank goes to the movies. The films he sees have a lasting impression on him and we see how they become a part of his

everyday life when he fantasises about "American girls [...] in swimming suits on the screen at the Lyric cinema" (340), or when he dreams of having singing priests like Bing Crosby who (in contrast to the priests Frank knows) will not deny him confession. More significant still, from the movies he gathers that Americans are able to give expression to their emotions, something Frankie confesses he too would like to be able to do. When he thinks about the time he spends with his dad in the mornings he tells us, "if I were in America I could say, I love you, Dad, the way they do in the films, but you can't say that in Limerick for fear you might be laughed at" (239). So deeply ingrained is his associating America with the movies that when he arrives in New York harbour he compares the surreal experience of having his dream finally come true with being "in a film," convinced "that it will end and lights will come up in the Lyric Cinema" (422).

Seeing that the cinema is a common means of entertainment in Limerick—especially Friday nights when the men go drinking and the women go to the movies—it is not surprising that they play such a major role in shaping Frankie's as well as other people's understanding of America. While fellow telegram boy Toby Mackey "saw a film called *The Front Page* and now he wants to go to America some day and be tough newspaper reporter with a hat and a cigarette" (375-376), Michael is inspired by *Yankee Doodle Dandy* and declares "it must be great to be in America where people have nothing else to do but sing and dance" (367). Frank's other family members want to go there too: Frank's brother Malachy makes a bit of money "shoveling coal [while] waiting for the day he can go to America" (415), whereas Angela constantly fantasises about returning to New York with her family since here "[they will] have a nice warm place to live and a lavatory down the hall" (121). Frank's father is similarly pro-American; while he initially avows that "he'll never go over [to work in England] and help [them] win a war" (248), he finally decides "the cause must be just" (249) since the Americans have become involved, and he leaves for England after all. He further tells Frank to study hard so that one day he can get an office job in America and become an important man (238).

Besides his immediate family, there are other people in town who encourage Frankie to go overseas. Mr. Hannon urges Frank to get an education and to "Get out of Limerick before [his] legs rot and [his] mind collapses entirely" (300). He tells Frankie he should "go to Australia or America or any big open country where you can look up and see no end to the land" (300). For the same reason, Uncle Pa Keating warns Frank against taking an examination which will allow him to become a permanent post office employee:

> If you pass the exam you'll stay in the post office nice and secure the rest of your life. You'll marry a Brigid and have five little Catholics and grow little roses in your garden. *You'll be dead in your head before you're thirty* and dried in your ballocks the year before. Make up your own bloody mind and to hell with the safeshots and the begrudgers. Do you hear me, Frankie McCourt? (391, my emphasis)

This, as Frankie tells Pa Keating, is exactly the point his headmaster is always making. Mr. O'Halloran is infatuated with America; speaking about the States "gets him so excited he might go on for the whole day" (334). He idolises its people for being able to "wrest from the English a continent" (334) and waxes lyrical when he describes it as a country which "from the frozen wastes of North Dakota to the fragrant orange groves of Florida [enjoys] all climates" (334). Appalled that gifted young people are destined to do menial jobs in Ireland because of the "class system foisted on [the Irish] by the English" (338), he tells Frankie to leave. When he says, "Go to America, McCourt" and asks, "Do you hear me?" Frankie answers, "I do, sir" (338). As intimated before, this constative utterance is ultimately turned into a performative when Frank takes Mr. O'Halloran and Pa Keating's advice and decides not to take the exam at the post office but to work until he has saved up enough money to go to New York.[11]

The fact that Frank is so determined to emigrate to America does not mean that he does not have second thoughts about going away. But this is not unusual when leaving behind hearth and home; as Iain Chambers has noted "The journey into the future, is also, and always, the journey backwards, towards home" ("A Stranger in the House" 36). This is true for Frankie too, and before setting off for the States he goes round Limerick and visits the houses they used to live in as well as the tombs of his twin brothers and his first love, Theresa Carmody. He contemplates whether "voices of the dead [...] can follow you across the Atlantic" (418) and tells us, "I want to get pictures of Limerick stuck in my head in case I never come back" (418). Though he realises that they have their shortcomings, he feels upset about leaving his family behind. There were, after all, good times like when they would all snuggle up in bed together, or the time when he and Malachy had "come home from school in a heavy rain" (104) and had found their parents sitting "nice and warm [upstairs] with a fire blazing in the grate" (104). He wonders if he "should have stayed, taken the post office examination" (420) as this would have probably sufficed to feed his family and get his brothers through school. But Frank is not swayed, and next thing he is on a boat to New York.

In New York harbour a warm welcome helps him to momentarily forget his sadness. When they have to stop for the night in Poughkeepsie, Frank is invited to a party. This is where he meets Frieda, who is out looking for a good time while her husband has gone hunting. Frank is not unwilling to comply:

> [Frieda] takes my hand and leads me into a bedroom, puts down her glass, locks the door, pushes me down on the bed. [...] Jesus I'm in heaven [...] oh God oh Theresa do you see what's happening to me at long last I don't give a fiddler's fart if the Pope himself knocked on this door and the College of Cardinals gathered gawking at the windows [...]. (424)

[11] As Stanley Cavell points out in *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*, according to Austin's theory, when words do not depict but actually enact what an individual is doing, they are "performative" and no longer "constative" (79-80). In McCourt's case, when the protagonist finally sets sail for America, his constative "I do" (338) becomes performative.

Little wonder then that Frank, when asked later that evening, "Isn't this a great country altogether?" (425) laconically answers, "'Tis" (426). These are also the final words of the book and we are not given any further indication whether life in the US in the end lived up to his expectations. However, in his follow-up memoirs *'Tis* and *Teacher Man*,[12] we are given more insight into his experiences in America and into his pursuit of living a fulfilled life. Not surprisingly, neither his professional nor his private life there is as simple as Frank thought it would be. Initially he does unskilled work and then enlists in the army before he becomes a teacher. His personal relationships are also not less complicated than they were in Limerick. In fact, he is married three times: from the first union he has a daughter, Maggie, but divorces her mother, Alberta "Mike" Small, after sixteen years, and his second marriage to psychiatrist Cheryl Ford only lasts about a year. Conjugal bliss is nonetheless generally considered to have settled in with Ellen Frey, to whom he was married from 1994 until his death in 2009.

More poignant than experiencing everyday unpleasantness, however, is the realisation that instead of actually escaping displacement by coming to America, Frank has exchanged one set of exile for another. Though he was born in America, he discovers that he is not quite at home there. In *'Tis* he reports on the number of cultural differences he notices between the Americans and the Irish. He cannot understand "why America is so hard and complicated" (36) and why you cannot take your own treats into the cinema, the way he used to do in Limerick (33). He says, "I wonder about all those films where they're waving the Stars and Stripes and placing their hands on their chests and declaring to the world this is the land of the free and the home of the brave and you know yourself you can't even go to see *Hamlet* with your lemon meringue pie and your ginger ale" (48). Other things Frank needs to get used to is the way Americans speak (14). The Americans, in turn, cannot help but notice *his* distinct way of talking, and he is probably set apart more by his language than any other aspect. He is clearly frustrated at this and tells us, "there are times when I wish I could reach into my mouth and tear my accent out by the root. Even when I try to sound American people look puzzled and say, Do I detect an Irish brogue?" (223). Asked about this issue in an interview with Academy of Achievement, McCourt stated, "The minute I opened my mouth they'd say, 'Oh, you're Irish.' Suddenly I'm labeled. I wasn't a human being. In Ireland I was just a low-class type, but here [in America] I'm a low-class Irish type, an Irish low-class type" ("Interview" par. 54).

Linguistic and cultural dislocation work together to make Frank feel like a foreigner and out of place in the States. But, as he tells us in *'Tis*, he does not belong in Limerick either. Whenever he goes back to his hometown to see his family he feels like "a visitor, a returned Yank" (374). After one such an occasion he avers, "even though I'm happy to be returning to New York I hardly know where I belong anymore" (375). Elsewhere he writes, "I'd like to be

[12] McCourt's other work is perhaps less well-known and include *Angela and the Baby Jesus (*a children's book), the musical show *The Irish …and How They Got That Way,* as well as joint projects such as *Yeats is dead*, and *A Couple of Blaguards*, which he wrote in collaboration with his brother Malachy.

Irish when it's time for a song or a poem. I'd like to be American when I teach. I'd like to be Irish-American or American-Irish though I know I can't be two things" (360). Neither completely at home in the US nor in Ireland, the protagonist's identity is in crisis as he is caught between two worlds. With all of this in mind one might conclude that he did not foresee the way in which exile would increase his feelings of not belonging nor did he reckon with the difficulties of adapting to a new culture and environment. Still, although life in New York is not exactly like in the movies, and despite the fact that Frank does not escape exile by going into exile, America certainly presents him with opportunities, and in the end he lives the American Dream by going from rags to riches. Significantly, he achieves this breakthrough by writing about where he comes from and about his childhood. This is why I claimed that McCourt follows the Joycean example of getting inspiration from his youth and using it for his work, thereby writing Ireland—and the people who shared his life—into history.[13]

Create/expiate

McCourt's memoir clearly deals with dislocation. What I would like to establish in this section is his reasons for writing about it. As concerns the latter, in the Introduction I pointed out that the text can function as a site where writers (for different reasons and in various ways) deal with displacement, and/or that exile may excite the artist's imagination. Based on indices in *Angela's Ashes*, as well as on what McCourt himself has disclosed in this regard, in what follows I argue that McCourt writes about displacement for both the aforementioned reasons.

That a written work can provide the means of escaping the present by allowing the reader or writer to get lost in the world of the text is certainly true for Frankie. When in hospital with typhoid fever he gets books to read, and he feels safe in the knowledge that no one can stop him from indulging in reverie all day. He proclaims, "I can dream about the red-lipped landlord's daughter and the highwayman, and the nurses and nuns can do nothing about it. It's lovely to know the world can't interfere with the inside of your head" (229). For the same reason he adores the tales his father tells him and his brothers, which he says "take [them] all over the world, up in the air, under the sea and back to the lane" (238). Frankie and his brothers have then also inherited their father's love for a good yarn. When Malachy goes to England, Frankie says:

> We put the last of the coal on the fire and sit around telling stories which we make up the way Dad did. I tell my brothers about my adventures with the lemonade and bread and I make up stories about how I was chased by pub owners and shopkeepers and how I ran into St. Joseph's Church where no one can follow you if you're a criminal, not even if you killed your own mother (271)

[13] On this matter, Carolyn Hughes has noted that "McCourt has done for the city what James Joyce did for Dublin and William Kennedy for Albany [...] since *Angela's Ashes* was published, tourism in Limerick is booming" (28).

Besides a good story, Frank relishes poetic diction. The first time he comes across Shakespeare he is ten. He says "I don't know what it means and I don't care because it's Shakespeare and it's like having jewels in my mouth when I say the words" (222). He finds their cadence soothing and says that reciting "*I do believe/Induced by potent circumstances/ That thou art mine enemy* […] helps [him] fall asleep" (231, italics original). Another time, he compares Shakespeare with other playwrights whose plays he listens to on the radio, and asserts that Shakespeare is "the best of all, even if he is English. Shakespeare is like mashed potatoes, you can never get enough of him" (318-319).

Reading or listening to stories thus helps Frank to break free from reality and from everyday life in Limerick. But the protagonist in *Angela's Ashes* only finds escape in the texts of *others*, and never creates a world of his own where he can forget his adverse surroundings. In fact, he waits sixty odd years before putting pen to paper. The arduous journey to completing his first book is also set out in *Teacher Man*, but this is how McCourt, quoted on the Academy of Achievement website, summarises the conception of his first memoir:

> I taught what they call 'Creative Writing' though you and I know how hard it is to teach anyone anything […]. Instead of teaching writing I 'conducted' writing classes. I tried to show my students the significance of their own lives which they sometimes thought insignificant. I hoped they'd realize the value of their own lives, that they were good enough to write about. So they took the plunge and they wrote and some were willing to read to the class and I think they were glad they did. Then they'd say to me, 'Why don't you write something and read it to the class?' And I did—more and more. ("Frank McCourt Biography" par. 4)

In the aforementioned interview with Carolyn Hughes in *Poets & Writers*, McCourt explains that though he was born a writer, he found writing *Angela's Ashes* "emotionally draining" (Hughes 27). In *Time* magazine, he has been quoted as saying that "It was only when I felt I could finally distance myself from the past that I began to write about what happened" (Grossman par. 7). Taking the above into account, and not forgetting McCourt's resentment about his familial and social circumstances, I want to suggest that writing his memoir provided him with a platform to voice his dissatisfaction with the way he grew up, and in this way deal with the misery he suffered—albeit more than a half a century after the events took place.[14] Thus Richard Freadman's claim that "the very writing of autobiography is itself perhaps an act of will, a way of imposing a certain shape and meaning on the life that one has had" (6) also seems to apply to McCourt.

McCourt, so my wager, writes because it is a way of coming to terms with the past. At the same time, the unfamiliarity of his new surroundings inspire him to write about the home he has left behind. McCourt's inherent creativity (evinced, for example, in the essay "Our Lord" which he writes when he is eleven) is, then, stimulated by the condition of exile. In the next section I subsequently argue that exile inspires McCourt's creative mind and animates his

[14] On this matter, James Mitchell has argued that McCourt "imaginatively returns to the past to overcome his specters, making the act of writing the memoir itself a triumph over the past, a reconfiguration of events that renders them bearable" (617).

childhood experiences[15] to such an extent that his memoir, as James Mitchell has argued, "reads more like a nineteenth-century novel than a memoir" (614). To this end, I look in detail at the various ways in which McCourt conflates autobiographical fact and fiction. However, I also explore the effects this has on his readership and claim that by blurring the border between actual events and invented ones, as well as by implementing novelistic techniques normally associated with fiction writing, McCourt's text creates feelings of discontent and displacement, and in this way becomes a means of conveying the protagonist's sense of exile to the reader.

Hustler

Despite receiving predominantly favourable reviews, the reaction to *Angela's Ashes* was not unanimously positive. In fact, when the book came out a small group of Limerick locals made strong objection to its contents and accused McCourt of making libellous claims and saying disparaging things about their town and its people. In response to online magazine *Slate*, who asked a number of memoirists to write (amongst others) about how they handled readers who had a different recollection of the events they wrote about in their narratives, McCourt answered thus:

> When the book was published in Ireland, I was denounced from hill, pulpit, and barstool. Certain citizens claimed I had disgraced the fair name of the city of Limerick, that I had attacked the church, that I had despoiled my mother's name, and that if I returned to Limerick, I would surely be found hanging from a lamppost.
> […].
> The only way around all this nervousness is the novel—and that's what I'm trying now. Yes, yes, I still have to cover my tracks—and my ass—but I'll have greater freedom.
> (McCourt, "When Irish Tongues Are Talking" par. 2-4)

Confronted with the problem of referentiality,[16] McCourt decides to make his next project a novel (one he regrettably does not complete). By making such a decision, what he is effectively saying is that crossing the boundaries between fact and fiction is more complicated and has more far-reaching consequences when writing an autobiography than when creating a novel. As will become apparent, this idea has to do primarily with the complexities surrounding the notion of autobiographical truth. In order to provide some explanation as to why exactly McCourt's narrative unsettled some readers, in what follows I discuss the reactions to his memoir in detail as well as look at the theory regarding the concepts of reference and truth. In order to then come back to the dialectic of creativity/exile, I ask if and to what extent this exilic text, located somewhere between the real and the fictional world,

[15] As far back as 1961, Harry Levin postulated that "there are no memories so vivid, no impressions so indelible, as our recollections from our early childhood; and these are most perfectly preserved when we are far away from the localities we associate with them […]" (73).

[16] To avoid any confusion, I would like to adopt Alun Munslow's definition of the term, namely that "[referentiality means] the accuracy and veracity with which the narrative relates what actually happened in the past" (5).

manages to convey the subject's sense of displacement, and finish off by analysing the relationship between exile, the shiftiness of the text and the reader's discomfort.

A good starting point is the discontent surrounding the alleged fictionality in *Angela's Ashes*. *Slate* (quoted before) is just one of many online sources which had set itself the goal of finding out the truth about McCourt. Another is *Mail Online*, who rhetorically asked in their heading whether "Frank McCourt [was] REALLY telling the truth" or whether he was just "A miserable liar" (Brennan). The article, which revolves around the anger that manifested itself among the community of Limerick when *Angela's Ashes* first came out, quotes citizens as accusing McCourt of being "'a conman' and a hoaxer' [who had] 'prostituted' his own mother in his quest for literary stardom, by turning her into a downtrodden harlot who committed incest in his book" (par. 5). Further the report reveals how the lobby had painstakingly added up the number of fabrications or inconsistencies in the text to come up with "a total of '117 lies or inaccuracies'" (par. 23). One major concern was Limerick's portrayal as filthy and dilapidated, another was defamation. In addition to "wrongly accusing one local man of being a Peeping Tom" (par. 23), *Angela's Ashes* tainted the reputation of a young woman by purporting that she had had sex with Frank when she was already in advanced stages of tuberculosis. The ire in Ireland appeared to have no end with townspeople demanding an embargo on the movie and an independent radio journalist, Gerard Hannan, organising an anti-McCourt movement. In an article that appeared in Limerick.com,[17] Kevin Cullen writes that Hannan even wrote a counter-narrative entitled *Ashes*—supposedly with no reference to McCourt's title. Incidents like these abound in Cullen's article and underscore the discontent and indignation over the memoir.[18] Amongst these is a bizarre episode in which an old schoolfriend—who *did* happen to be there at the time the story unfolds—encountered McCourt at an event and "denounced him while tearing up a paperback copy of the book" (par. 18). Another example Cullen includes is the fact that "The local newspaper, The Limerick Leader, has made disparaging McCourt a regular feature" (par. 12).[19]

One might wonder how the newspaper for one could have missed the significant detail that McCourt's book was designated a *memoir*. Shannon Forbes believes it is important that *Angela's Ashes* was published with the subtitle *A Memoir of a Childhood* after it "was at first alternately identified as fiction and as autobiography" (474). This shows that the author

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[17] The article by Cullen, last accessed on 1 May 2011, appears to have been removed from the Limerick.com website. It has subsequently been published on Irish Media Man.

[18] Cullen also points out, however, that not all Limerick's inhabitants objected to the memoir; among those who welcomed the book was the University of Limerick who awarded McCourt an honorary degree in 1997. Cullen maintains that "It wouldn't be Irish if there wasn't a split, and the split here is between those who see 'Angela's Ashes' as an exaggerated, mean-spirited attack on the city and its people, and those who embrace the book's art, humanity, and the attention, whether good or bad, it has brought Limerick" (par. 4). I would argue that having such diverse opinions extends beyond the borders of nationality. Depending on how highly they value the autobiographical pact, as well as on whether they are privy to background information about the author, some readers might feel perturbed when factual inaccuracies are brought to light while others might appreciate the text for its poignancy and *transcendental* truth-value, irrespective of how much of it is fictional.

[19] Cullen writes that "Brendan Halligan, editor of the Limerick Leader, denied that the paper was engaged in an ongoing campaign to discredit McCourt, even while citing recent stories that purported to do just that" (par. 13).

realised that there was a distinction between autobiography and memoir, the latter, according to Forbes, referring to the way past experiences are fashioned in our subjective memory. Further, by designating his work as memoir, McCourt managed to exempt himself from any claims to its truth-value, since it is a non sequitur that a memoir—that is, a subjective account of what we recall—can be fallacious (473-474). That Forbes is right in assuming McCourt made an informed choice regarding the classification of his text has been corroborated by the author himself:

> In many ways I was guided by Gore Vidal, who said in his memoir, *Palimpsest*, that an autobiography is the attempt to recreate the facts of your life—your memoir is your impression of your life. The facts are there, but then what impression did they leave? (qtd. in Mitchell 614)[20]

Though Forbes, then, clearly has a point it has to be stressed that the difference between the terms *memoir* and *autobiography* is academic,[21] and although McCourt might have been aware of it, the majority of his readers evidently was *not*, which explains the vehement protest he came up against. In hindsight, he might have avoided some of the unpleasantness by furnishing his writing with some sort of precautionary note, like Laurie Lee does in *Cider with Rosie*:

> NOTE
>
> Some parts of this book were originally published in *Orion*, *Encounter*, *The Queen* and *The Cornhill*, and two other fragments have been adapted from pieces first written for *Leader Magazine* and *The Geographical Magazine*. The book is a recollection of early boyhood, and *some of the facts may be distorted by time*. (8, my emphasis)

But maybe McCourt did not *want* to shun confrontation. His official response to the rigorous criticism was that he could not allow himself to bother about such matters. He had related the events as he remembered them and was unable to stop those who would from being affronted, as *Mail Online* reports (par. 35). *Mail Online's* take on the story is of course naive and its interest one of sensation, asking if "McCourt [had crossed] the line between fact and fiction" (par. 22), and melodramatically concluding that "The truth is, we may never know" (par. 8). My own interest is clearly not to determine whether parts of *Angela's Ashes* are fake or not, nor is it to decide if the citizens of Limerick were harsh in their condemnation of McCourt. The question I would like to ask is *why* there was such a degree of indignation

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[20] Mitchell precedes the quote above by pointing out that "In an interview, McCourt offers some remarks on the processes of remembering and compiling that his books withholds" (614)

[21] In *Reading Autobiography,* Smith and Watson note that the distinction between the original and present-day use of *memoir* has all but disappeared: "Historically [...] the memoir directs attention more toward the lives of others than to the narrator. [...]. In contemporary parlance *autobiography* and *memoir* are used interchangeably. [...]. Currently, the term refers generally to life writing that takes a segment of a life, not its entirety, and focusing on interconnected experiences" (274). On this matter, Timothy C. Baker argues that "while the distinction between autobiography and memoir is traditionally understood to be one of relative completeness, in which the former recounts the subject's whole life and the latter focuses on a particular aspect or moment, it is difficult to imagine how any self-account could be other than partial or anecdotal" (219).

about the truth-value of the book.[22] Why, in other words, does the truth matter so much, and why is the border between fact and fiction policed so vigorously? More pertinent still, is there any correlation between the readers' discontent and that of the author? Put differently, does the intertwining of fact and fiction undergird the writer's sense of displacement to such an extent that his unease becomes palpable and is even transferred to the reader? In what follows I try to answer these questions, first by delving into the notion of truth and then working my way towards exile and alienation.

On referentiality

At the risk of stating the obvious, the concept of referentiality comes laden with theory and controversy. Therefore, before I analyse the reasons why (not) telling the (whole) truth is so significant in cases such as *Angela's Ashes*, I would like to spend some time on its polemic past, and on the idea that what we *think* reference is, might not exist at all. Clearly, the problematic notion of veracity is intricate and comprises too many strands to be dealt with adequately here. However, truth in its relation to language, to the self and to knowledge are pertinent to this chapter, and will subsequently be addressed.

Seeing that we are dealing with texts, language is inevitably at the heart of this thesis and hence an appropriate point of departure for the discussion on truth in relation to autobiography writing. In the Introduction it was mentioned that, in life writing circles, theorists like Paul de Man argued that language does not so much reflect as create the material world of the autobiographer. This poststructuralist way of thinking did not, of course, start with autobiography studies but had its origins in Ferdinand de Saussure's work on verbal signs (still worth mentioning here, albeit common knowledge). Saussure argued that words are signs that refer to an image or a concept and not to a referent in the concrete world. In addition, the combination of signified and signifier means something precisely because it distinguishes itself from other such combinations in the language system. As Sean Homer puts it, "A sign does not refer us to a specific object in the real material world, but rather to another sign which in turn refers us to another sign and so on" (39). Thus, "Language does not reflect reality but rather one produces one's experience within the constraints of the given language system" (40). As such, the question of referentiality in any text—whether it be fictional, autobiographical or a combination of the two—is problematised. This is because what is referred to in the text is *not* any fixed reality but contingent on what each reader imagines under the combination of signs used. To complicate matters, signs can

[22] Ivan Cañadas believes "Responses to *Angela's Ashes* are perhaps symptomatic of a broader, widespread phenomenon in contemporary letters" (17). Further he posits that despite present-day interest in knowing the truth, "in looking, at *Angela's Ashes* [...] it seems that current trends ironically point back to the very inception of the novel form, reproducing the claims to marginal truth of the picaresque genre" (17). To support his claim, he argues that both *Angela's Ashes* and *The Life of Lazarillo of Tormes and of his Fortunes and Adversities* (1554) —"the prototype of the picaresque genre" (9)—not only give an outsider's depiction of the past, but also rely on burlesque to question conventions and norms. McCourt's memoir is described as "a highly successful recent example of this literary genre" (13), and the polemic surrounding its publication is regarded as completely in keeping with the standard reaction to the picaresque novel and its "parodic, subversive relationship to 'official' discourses" (9).

have meaning even if the referent is completely absent. To adapt J. Hillis Miller's analogy, just because a sign might read "'Gate' [and be] accompanied by a pointing arrow and the words '¼ mile'" (Miller 16), this does not necessarily mean that there is a real gate that you will be able to see and touch a quarter of a mile in the appropriate direction from where you are at the present moment.

In short this means that what we think of as being referenced depends on our individual interpretation of a text; indeed, what is being referenced might not have any referent in the material world whatsoever (a phenomenon which fiction writing clearly exploits). Being aware thereof might make us feel uncomfortable, and this is perhaps nowhere felt so keenly as when trying to pinpoint the referent of the signifier *I*. In response to the self-imposed question, "what does *I* refer to?" (730, italics original), Émile Benveniste famously postulated that "*I* refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker" (730). It follows that "I" has a transitory nature; Benveniste argues that "There is no concept 'I' that incorporates all the *I*'s that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all speakers, in the sense that there is a concept 'tree' to which all the individual uses of *tree* refer" (730). "I" in other words has no collective referent but marks the person who is saying *I*. According to Sean Homer, following Benveniste, Jacques Lacan postulated that "the 'I' in speech does not refer to anything stable in language" (45). Further, the Lacanian dictum "I is an other" implies that "There is always a disjunction […] between the subject of enunciation and the subject of utterance" (45).[23]

In summary one can say that language is powerful; it shapes our material world and produces meaning. This necessarily complicates the notion of truth as far as texts are concerned, as they do not refer to a fixed reality but depend on the way each reader interprets the words on the page. Most disturbingly, perhaps, language exacts a split between the enunciator and enunciated, thereby undermining the stability of the subject. The issue of reference, however, is not only complicated by the nature of the linguistic system but also by the fact that the epistemological content of the material world—that which constitutes knowledge and hence truth—has been called into question. In *S/Z* Roland Barthes suggests the term "cultural codes [as] references to a science or a body of knowledge" (20) which, he claims, is ensconced in "an anonymous Book whose best model is doubtless the School Manual" (205). Barthes goes on to make the point that these"references" (206), embedded in "the set of seven or eight handbooks accessible to a diligent student in the classical bourgeois educational system" (205) are not the truth or reality but that they "appear to establish reality" (206).

But it is not only the common knowledge base itself that one should be distrustful of. Alun Munslow writes that one of the features of modernity is "its self-consciousness in asking questions about how we know what we know" (2). Contrary to popular belief, he claims that

[23] To bring this back to life writing, Paul John Eakin, in his analysis of referentiality in *Roland Barthes*, argues that "Barthes [goes] out of his way to undercut the notion that the discourse of autobiography is supported by a structure of reference" (*Touching the World* 4).

postmodernism is not new in its questioning of the means by which knowledge is achieved;[24] rather, it is the instance of modernism changing and becoming more cognisant of its censuring the ways in which knowledge is come by. The postmodern era, then, is "the changed and contemporary condition under which we gain knowledge" (2), and which includes our questioning "the accurate representation of reality" (2). What Jean-François Lyotard implied when he described postmodernity as distrustful of master narratives, Munslow says, is that we can no longer take any knowledge at face value but that we need to put it into a larger context; that is, "study both the content of the past and its interpretation in narrative form" (17).

So far, I have focused on the problematic nature of referentiality in terms of language and the self, as well as in terms of what constitutes knowledge and how it is interpreted/ represented. I have not, however, made the distinction between referentiality in fictional and autobiographical texts. As the discussion starts moving into the realm of life narratives, yet another layer of complexity will, of necessity, be added to what constitutes truth.[25] Unravelling these intricacies will not only reveal some of the reasons why the boundary between the fictional and the real is controlled so vigorously (and so help answer the question posed at the start of this section) but also help me find my way back to McCourt. In his work on twentieth-century British literary autobiography, Brian Finney looks at the complex nature of veracity with specific reference to life writing. He observes the evolution of "what is seen as the truth" (21), and looks at how it has impacted on autobiography from the middle ages up to the contemporary period (21-23). He starts off with St Augustine's *Confessions*, which upholds the medieval doctrine of giving precedence to religion over one's self and of being true to God. According to Finney, the first real breach with this way of viewing the world came only much later when Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the late eighteenth century conveyed, in and through his writing, that what ultimately mattered was to focus on and defer to the self. In the following era, however, "this defiantly individualist definition of the truth" (22) fell out of favour with the Victorians, who preferred "to focus on a historically factual and publically shared conception of the self" (22). This manner of thinking was, however, completely reversed with the arrival of Freud and his work on the unconscious. Freud radically changed the way man saw himself, and in the twentieth century it was no longer believed that the subject can be known in its entirety. That is, since there is always some part that will remain foreign and inaccessible to us, we as subjects can never access the whole truth about our selves. This, says Finney, is the reason why modern autobiographers doubt the truth-value of their memories and do not believe it possible to write a

[24] According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodernism makes us aware of the fact that "We only have access to the past through its traces—its documents, the testimony of witnesses, and other archival materials. In other words, we only have representations of the past from which to construct our narrative or explanations" (55).

[25] In the Introduction the notion of autobiographical truth was touched on and mention was made of Paul de Man's claim that autobiography is "tropological" (De Man 922). In "Narrative and Chronology as Structures of Reference and the New Model Biographer," Paul John Eakin reminds us what De Man is intimating is "that the illusions of reference we experience as we read such texts is really only a fiction" (32).

comprehensive narrative about their past. Instead, they opt for highlighting certain past happenings while commenting on the significance these have had for them in order to impart their true character.

James Olney picks up on this argument in his essay "Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of Bios: The Ontology of Autobiography," in which he also refers to the *Autobiographies of William Butler Yeats*. Olney namely maintains that what is intimated in the *Autobiographies* is that the events should not be taken at face value but that the words and deeds of the personae should be regarded as reflecting their real selves. Since it is quite impossible to live out one's true nature, Yeats shows us how the characters in his work "would speak and act *if* their speech and action were always in keeping with their deepest character" (263, emphasis original). This is why, according to Olney, what is important to Yeats is not to portray what actually happened, but to reveal to us how he sees himself, as well as how he sees others, at the time of writing. In the end he succeeds in giving us "a truer truth than fact, a deeper reality than history" (263). One might say that, although the autobiographer will inevitably (mis)remember, select, and construe past happenings so that, as Susanna Egan has remarked, "Fiction […] ensnares reality right from the beginning" (14), the writing *I*'s nature ostensibly cannot *but* transpire.

Autobiographical truth is then justifiably complex, not only because it has undergone major conceptual changes through the ages but also because it is concerned with the meaning a writer attributes to facts or past happenings, and not just with the events themselves. Another facet of life writing that complicates the already dubious nature of truth pertains to the fragile nature of the virtual pact between the writer and reader.[26] In "Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name" Jacques Derrida depicts autobiography as "a secret contract" that needs to be "honored […] by another" (9), thus implicating the reader. Developing this idea one might posit that without the other (that is, the writer without the reader and vice versa), there *is* no life. In order to validate a life lived and recounted, then, both parties need to respect the autobiographical agreement—the writer needs to write about his life and the reader needs to be receptive to what is being said in order to decipher and understand the text. To Barrett Mandel, since the truth of a piece of life writing lies not so much in the events described as in "the writer's intention to tell the truth" (72), the reader of an autobiographical narrative should "cocreate [the] context that allows autobiography to speak the truth" (72). But while such an argument seems reasonable in theory, it is not always endorsed by the parties concerned. As Brian Finney (21) and Jerome Bruner ("The Autobiographical Process" 39-41) amongst others have rightly noted, referentiality often has a very different meaning for those that are producing and those that are interpreting a text. This means that the expectations and intentions of the author do not

[26] As I show in the Introduction, many contemporary writers and readers still believe that this pact is sacred and that it should not be tampered with. In the section above I come back to the idea that readers who mistake autobiography for fiction (or the other way around) feel cheated, and that they believe they need to know whether the book they are reading is fictitious or not, since it makes a difference to how it is read and understood.

always coincide with those of the reader, in which case there is a clash of desires and often a sentiment of having been deceived.[27]

For the purposes of analysing the discrepancy between the reader and writer's expectations in more depth it is instructive to look at the work Paul John Eakin has done on referentiality in autobiography and on reader response. In *Touching the World* Eakin points out the irony of the fact that we go on reading and writing autobiography even though we are aware of "theory's deconstruction of reference" (30). In attempt to account for this seemingly paradoxical behaviour, Eakin posits that "readers and the autobiographers who write for them seem prepared to defend the existence of a generic boundary between biography and fiction despite knowledge that this distinction […] may well partake more of fiction than fact" (30). Further he claims that their clinging to the truth-value of autobiography is "a kind of existential imperative, a will to believe" (30).

In *Fictions in Autobiography* Eakin reiterates that we are enticed to, but also that we *want* to believe that what we are reading is factually accurate (56). This is why we wish for autobiography to reflect the author's life and why we feel deceived if we detect traces of fiction (9-10). Eakin alludes more overtly to the covenant between the autobiographer and the reader in *Living Autobiographically*; here he states that "We don't […] read autobiographies in the same way that we read novels […]. I believe that our life stories are not merely *about* us but in an inescapable and profound way *are* us" (x, emphasis original). To elucidate the sacredness of this pact Eakin refers to the immense controversy surrounding James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (21). When it came to light that the book, which was published as a memoir, contained fabrications about Frey's past, there was a public outcry. Eakin believes this is because writers that scorn autobiographical etiquette—of which, he says, "telling the truth is the cardinal rule" (21)—cannot dictate the way they will be read. He adds, however, that readers are fickle in this regard and more willing to oversee little inconsistencies "when they are having fun" (21).

Ironically (considering the foregoing discussion) Eakin cites *Angela's Ashes* as an example of a work where readers are tolerant of inaccuracies.[28] This is because although it is clear that Frankie could not have recalled and recorded the precise conversations he had witnessed as a child of preschool going age, it is precisely by using "this imaginative reconstruction" (21) of the past—or what George O'Brien has called McCourt's "imaginative

[27] This brings to mind Wolfgang Iser's reception theory. Robert Holub writers that "[Iser] wants to see meaning as the result of an interaction between text and reader" (83).

[28] We need to keep in mind that the reaction to *Angela's Ashes* was divided. While it was lauded in great parts of the English-speaking world, including in Ireland, there were those—as we have seen—who believed McCourt had invented substantial parts of his memoir and had put his hometown in a bad light (Cullen, pars. 3-5).

embellishment" ("The Last Word" 242)[29]— that "writers impress us as trying to tell the fundamental biographical truth of their lives" (Eakin 21), and that we are willing to let him off the hook for not scrupulously sticking to the facts.[30] Readers, claims Eakin, are able to tell the difference when a writer uses fiction to *enhance* past events and convey the essence of who they are, and when they (as in Frey's case) take things too far and make their audience feel as if they had been tricked (21). It might then very well be, as Brian Finney has argued, that "The autobiographer can shape, dramatize or stylize his material, but he cannot knowingly invent it" (71). Considering the degree of protest *Angela's Ashes* met with in Limerick one can only assume that in this case those literally closest to home felt that McCourt had not merely enhanced events but had deliberately fabricated lies about his family and about their town, and that in doing so he had sold them out.

In *Autobiography*, Linda Anderson (as briefly intimated in the Introduction) alludes to another well-known example indicative of how much the truth matters in contemporary society. Anderson namely addresses the contention created by Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood 1939-1948*, purportedly the memoirs of a Nazi concentration camp inmate, but later generally considered to be fiction. When the text's fictionality was discovered, there was widespread and vehement objection among readers (despite the fact that the author stuck to his original story). Anderson ascribes the protest the book came up against to the fact that "shifting from one genre to another [was] profoundly disturbing to readers" (132). Not that she sides with them; on the contrary, she asks if referentiality should really concern us here. Surely, in cases such as these, shouldn't it be of greater concern that the underlying truth is brought to the fore, and that the world is reminded of the atrocities committed in the camps, rather than the fact that the subject relating the events was not physically there (132-133)? Anderson might have a point but, as Jannah Loontjens has noted in "Resisting the Author: J.T. Leroy's Fictional Authorship," a paradox in literary circles is that "Although the majority of literary theorists over the last four decades have agreed that the intentions and biography of an author are irrelevant to the text [...] authors are increasingly marketed on the basis of their life story" (par. 6). Therefore,

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[29] In "The Last Word: Reflections on *Angela's Ashes*," O'Brien takes issue with the portrayal of Limerick in the memoir. Though he does not deny the socially deplorable conditions Frank McCourt grew up in, he questions what he regards to be an exaggerated account of the events: "[...] it is not that people in Limerick did not invoke the Famine, the English, the Protestants, the faith of their fathers, Freedom, Northerners, and all the rest of it. But they did not do so as consistently as they are said to have done. Nobody could. No community does" (242). In his reading O'Brien does not, however, allow any scope for hyperbole, which McCourt clearly uses for emphasis and *not* because he wants us to take his assertions at face value. Put differently, McCourt exaggerates to stress the overriding impression of his childhood in Ireland, and not to make a claim that the entire population of Limerick was incessantly invoking religion, politics and poverty.

[30] Other critics who have written on why tweaking the truth in this way does not detract from the text include Shannon Forbes and James Phelan. Forbes has coined the term "the Performance as Fabricator technique," which she uses to describe instances "when McCourt-as-Author tells readers that which readers know he could not possibly know firsthand" (487). She moreover argues that "It is improbable, in such a case, that McCourt-as-Author is asking his readers to accept as truth this obvious unlikelihood" (489). James Phelan believes that the discrepancy between the adult and child's voice adds to the narrative: "The unreliable narration is itself one of the means of heightening the mimetic component of the narrative: the gap between the child's understanding and evaluation of events and those of the mature author is crucial to McCourt's construction of Frankie as a plausible nonfictional character" (73).

Michel Foucault's idea that we will no longer ask "Who really spoke?"or "With what authenticity or originality?" (qtd. in Loontjens par. 20) has not yet taken hold. Instead, these concerns are precisely what attracts readers and scholars to autobiography writing. Further Loontjens postulates that, instead of wanting to get insight into the text, the reason that readers are concerned with these issues is in order "to let the work help understand themselves better" (par. 21).

To understate, the notion of autobiographical truth is complex. Since the whole extent of the self can never be known, writers interpret and disclose selected events in their lives in order to give an account of their true character. But these writerly expectations and intentions do not always correlate with those of their readers, who quickly feel that their pact with the autobiographer has been violated and who consequently condemn the writer for giving false testimony. What is more, a contemporary readership still seems to cherish the truth-value of an autobiographical text, possibly because the texts *are* them, or at least reflect and help them to understand the world they are living in. When this is meddled with and the truth of a life narrative exposed as being nothing but an illusion, readers are fundamentally shaken and can no longer make sense of their own reality.

Of course in the instance of *Angela's Ashes* and the hostility it engendered, things need not be so complicated. Perhaps it was just a matter of feeling slighted because of the way their town was portrayed that got the Limerick locals up in arms. Or perhaps they still remembered old Frankie and just didn't like his guts. This, however, would not explain the *extent* of their outrage. Taking into account the severity of their criticism as well as the fact that similar patterns of behaviour have been found in the cases of Frey and Wilkomirski, I believe their anger would be better understood if one considered the volatile nature of the autobiographical pact as well as the desire to believe that the world in the text resonates with their own. To my mind, it is then a case of the writer's moving between different worlds (the virtual and the real) which disturbs and unsettles the reader.

My contention in this chapter is that the author's homelessness, the shiftiness of the text and the reader's sense of unease are inseparably and inescapably bound up with each other. This claim requires that at some point in his life the writer finds himself in exile and consequently experiences feelings of displacement and alienation. He determines to write a book and to recount the major events of his formative years; he calls it a memoir. Writing about himself he marries two worlds, the fictional and the factual. He does so firstly by embellishing certain characters and events, and secondly by appropriating narrative elements normally associated with fiction (a technique that will shortly be dealt with). Evidently, we can never know what he ultimately wanted to achieve by interweaving the fictional and the real, or whether the ensuing effects were intended or not, but that does not seem to be terribly important here. What *is* relevant is that the text has now become ambiguous, and when the reader engages with it, he or she is disturbed by the fact that it does not explicitly belong to either the fictional or the non-fictional world. The exact extent of

the reader's unease depends on how much importance is placed on the autobiographical pact, but it is doubtful whether there is anyone who will feel totally indifferent once they ascertain that the memoir reads like a novel, or once they discover that not all of it is completely accurate; that is, when they realise that they cannot unequivocally categorise the text. If one, then, accepts that the reader is left feeling ill at ease about the interplay of fictionality and factuality, one can claim that the autobiographer uses the text as a vehicle to relay his unease. In this way, the text acts as go-between, linking the discontentedness and unease of the writer with that of the reader.[31]

Fact meets fiction—Take 2

In her essay "Fiction, Autobiography and Memoir Intertwined: The Writings of Frank McCourt and Lozje Kovačič," Alenka Koron deals with the complexity of referentiality in *Angela's Ashes* as well as in Kovačič's *Prišleki*. In response to the long-standing debate whether fiction can categorically be distinguished from non-fiction, Koron posits that texts have authenticity markers or "orientation signals" (160) which we use to guide us in our reading. In short this means that we determine a book's fictionality by deferring, amongst others, to what we know of the world and of other texts. Koron then goes on to offer another, more enlightening interpretation of McCourt's story by virtue of applying "the pragmatic model for distinguishing between fiction and non-fiction" (160) as proposed by Nickel-Bacon, Groeben and Schreier in their paper "Fiktionssignale pragmatisch: Ein medienübergreifendes Modell zur Unterscheidung von Fiktion(en) und Realität(en)." What Nickel-Bacon et al. suggest is that a text should be examined according to a triangular scheme, i.e. analysed on "a pragmatic […] semantic [and] syntactic level" (160). Koron posits that *Angela's Ashes* may be rated as non-fictional on the first level (it is, after all, qualified as being *A Memoir of a Childhood*) as well as on the semantic tier (the narrator's life and that of the writer share similarities).[32] Analysed for its syntax, however, McCourt's text classifies as fiction. This is because in its "narrative transmission" (162) it implements techniques usually associated with fiction writing; not only does it make use of external focalization and the historical present but it also displays an intricate "temporal ordering, with its ellipses and condensation of episodes" (162). To these I would like to add characterisation and speech presentation.

As the aforementioned literary devices make McCourt's childhood memoir read like fiction, the text's balancing act between the fictional and real world becomes even more precarious, and the already existing confusion about the status of the text (as a result of the

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[31] In *The Irish Story,* R.F. Foster asserts that "*Angela's Ashes i*s not and never will be 'a classic memoir'" (168). Nonetheless, his contention that"[while] [t]he conventions of magical realism and poststructuralist flannel […] can be presented as a liberation from the tyranny of the ascertainable fact, it makes for some confusion as far as the reader is concerned" (166) underscores this thesis's claim that the enmeshment of the real and the invented induces malaise on the part of the reader.

[32] Surprisingly, Koron does not address the allegations of fabrication and libel made against McCourt.

embellishment of past events) even more acute. In this way, McCourt succeeds in conveying to the reader his own displacement and unease. Thus, as readers are unsettled by the shiftiness of the text, they are effectively made to feel the subject's exile. To the end of substantiating these claims, the last part of this chapter explores how McCourt manages to give his life narrative the look and feel of a novel. More specifically, it analyses the way in which four mainstream elements of fiction writing have been implemented in his memoir, including narration, characterisation, speech presentation and temporality.

Who speaks there?

That the narrator and the focaliser are close in *Angela's Ashes* is evident from the fact the events are generally narrated from Frank's point of view. But such an assertion, albeit valid, would give the interplay of narration, focalisation and voice in the narrative short shrift. To start off with, the book features not one but two narrators—the extradiegetic adult narrator looking back at his childhood years and the child-narrator of the story itself.[33] While the adult remains a stable entity, the diegetic subject grows up during the course of the book and his speech is accordingly adapted. Thus, when Frankie goes to his dad's work as a four-year-old the narrator uses simple, child-like language and tells us he sees "a big gate where there's a man standing in a box with windows all around" (19). Five years later his general understanding as well as his language skills have developed and when his mother has a baby in the house he says, "I'm older so I tell Malachy the bed is in the kitchen so that the angel can fly down and leave the baby on the seventh step" (203). As he gets older not only does his language change but also his subject position. When he is eleven he is very proud that he has landed a job delivering coal; he tells us, "Surely the world is looking at me and admiring the way I rock with the float, the cool way I have with the reins and the whip" (304). Then, in his teens, he evinces a maturity beyond his years as well as a general sexual awareness. At thirteen "[he knows] about the excitement and [that] it's a sin" (340); at almost fourteen he displays grown-up reasoning when he argues, "I can't let myself starve to death. If I starve I'll never have the strength for my telegram boy job at the post office, which means I'll have […] no way of saving to go to America" (349).

Because the memoir ends when the protagonist is nineteen, the two narrators never officially meet in the world of the text. What we do see, however, is a constant alternation between them, as is evident right from the start. The book begins with the adult narrator who says "My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born" (1) but after the first ten pages or so, in which he recounts the events that led up to his own as well as his brother Malachy's birth, there is an abrupt transition from the

[33] Shannon Forbes takes recourse to Judith Butler and her notion of "performative identity" (475) to look at the narratorial arrangement in *Angela's Ashes*. She argues that "the self of McCourt-as-Author is also a split subject. When McCourt-as-Author 'remembers' a particular conversation, event, letter or happening, he utilizes a set of often varying and complex linguistic structures and narrative techniques […]. These complex linguistic structures and narrative techniques create in the memoir specific performances, and hence, each time yield in the reader's mind a particular and often varying McCourt identity […]" (477).

adult to the three-year-old narrator. This can be inferred by the jump in time, indicated by the gap between the two paragraphs, as well as by the child-like language used:

> A year later another child was born. Angela called him Malachy […].
> The MacNamara sisters said Angela was nothing but a rabbit and they wanted nothing to do with her till she came to her senses.
> Their husbands agreed.
>
> I'm in a playground on Classon Avenue in Brooklyn with my brother, Malachy. He's two, I'm three. We're on the seesaw.
> Up, down, up, down.
> Malachy goes up.
> I get off.
> Malachy goes down. Seesaw hits the ground. He screams. His hand is on his mouth and there's blood. (11)

At other times, for instance in the scene below, the adult narrator sets the scene and then lets the child narrator take over, but without any shift in time or any indication as far as the layout is concerned:

> The apartment is empty and *I wander between the two rooms*, the bedroom and the kitchen. […].
> My father is in the kitchen sipping black tea from his big white enamel mug. He lifts me to his lap.
> Dad, will you tell me the story about Coo Coo?
> Cuchulain. Say it after me, Coo-hoo-lin. I'll tell you the story when you say the name right.
> Coo-hoo-lin.
> I say it right and he tells me the story of Cuchulain, who had a different name when he was a boy, Setanta. […].
> *That's my story*. Dad can't tell that story to Malachy or any other children down the hall. (12-13, my emphasis)

We come across this pattern of alternating narrators throughout the narrative. When describing his stay in hospital, for instance, the young and older narrator take turns to recount the events. We are told by the child that "You can't show you understand what the nurse said about Patricia Madigan, that she's going to die, and you can't show you want to cry over this girl who taught you a lovely poem which the nun says is bad" (225). Then, a few lines on, the adult takes over and tells us that one day "[Patricia] got out of the bed to go to the lavatory when she was supposed to use a bedpan and collapsed and died in the lavatory" (225). This seamless oscillation between the younger and older Frank makes it difficult to always keep the narrators apart. One night, when Malachy rocks up at home in an inebriated state, it is clearly young Frankie who says "I know it's my father because he's the only one in Limerick who sings that song from the North, Roddy McCorley goes to die on the bridge of Toome today" (122). But just a few lines further down it appears, judging by his choice of words, that the adult narrator has stealthily taken over: "[My father] stands in the middle of the lane and tells the world to step outside, he's ready to fight, ready to fight and die for Ireland, which is more than he can say for the men of Limerick, who are known the length and breadth of the world for collaborating with the perfidious Saxons" (122). Similarly, when four-year-old Frankie and his dad go to ask the IRA for financial assistance

and return home empty-handed, it seems at first that it is the young protagonist who is narrating the events; however, the sophisticated use of language makes it obvious that it is the older narrator who is speaking:

> Night falls along the streets of Dublin. Children laugh and play under streetlights, mothers call from doorways, smells of cooking come at us all the way, through windows we see people around tables, eating. I'm tired and hungry and I want Dad to carry me but I know there's no use asking him now the way his face is tight and set. (51)

There are other instances where it is even more difficult to discern between the two Franks, for example when we are told, "There may be a lack of tea or bread in the house but Mam and Dad always manage to get the fags, the Wild Woodbines" (153). The discourse is problematically neutral; that is, the language used could be associated either with a child of the protagonist's age or with a grown-up. However, the critical attitude evinced in the statement above might be ascribed to the older narrator, who sees the events through his younger self's eyes but who can articulate his dismay with the benefit of hindsight.

This leads me to my next point, namely the way in which McCourt uses focalization in his narrative. When the extradiegetic narrator is speaking the events are mostly (though not always) seen through the eyes of his younger self. But things are more complicated than that, for although the grown-up Frank presents the happenings from the diegetic subject's angle of vision, he is narrating the events *after* they have occurred, a circumstance which allows him to be analytical in his thinking and critical in his commentary.[34] This is evident when Angela is hospitalised and Aggie takes care of the boys. The narrator uses the opportunity to comment on his aunt's ill-temper and says, "I don't know why she's always angry. Her flat is warm and dry. She has electric light in the house and her own lavatory in the backyard. Uncle Pa has a steady job and he brings home his wages every Friday" (283). He moreover explicitly draws our attention to the fact that he is examining his impressions retrospectively when he tells us, "When you're eleven and your brothers are ten, five and one, you don't know what to do when you go to someone's house even if she's your mother's sister" (277).

While in the example above it is not concealed that it is the grown-up interpreting the events, elsewhere the child-narrator is used as a ruse for the other's voice to come through, such as when the narrator points out his mother and father's poor parenting skills. As we saw above, always having money for cigarettes but never for food is admonished. The same technique is used to comment on human foibles and failings in general. When Eugene is buried, for example, the language suggests that is the younger Frank who is speaking, whereas the criticism appears to belong to the older narrator who observes the folly of prejudice manifest among the members of his family:

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[34] As James Olney has noted, "In the act of remembering the past in the present, the autobiographer imagines into existence another person, another world, and surely it is *not* the same, in any real sense, as that past world that does not […] now exist" ("Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of *Bios*" 241, emphasis original).

> At home our room is filled with big people, Mam, Grandma, Aunt Aggie, her husband, Pa Keating, Uncle Pat Sheehan, Uncle Tom Sheehan, who is Mam's oldest brother and who never came near us before because he hates people from the North of Ireland. Uncle Tom has his wife, Jane, with him. She's from Galway and people say she has the look of a Spaniard and that's why no one in the family talks to her. (93)

By ostensibly narrating events through the eyes of the child but using it as a platform to raise his own voice, the implied author[35] shows his incomprehension for society's bigotry and its hypocrisy. The satire is palpable when he describes Limerick as a place where "[Women] don't sit because all they do is stay at home, take care of the children, clean the house and cook a bit and the men need the chairs. The men sit because they're worn out from walking to the Labour Exchange every morning to sign for the dole, discussing the world's problems and wondering what to do with the rest of the day" (118). He is, besides, critical of false pride and especially the pretentiousness in his community, and mocks those families who have made their money from sending their men to work in England's war effort and who now give themselves "airs" (247):

> The new rich people go home after Mass on Sundays all airs and stuff themselves with meat and potatoes, sweets and cakes galore, and they think nothing of drinking their tea from delicate little cups which stand in saucers to catch the tea that overflows and when they lift the cups they stick out their little fingers to show how refined they are. […]. They thank God for Hitler because if he hadn't marched all over Europe the men of Ireland would still be at home scratching their arses on the queue at the Labour Exchange. (247)

The child is also used as a mouthpiece to express the older narrator's views on the State and the Church. Notions such as giving your life for your country or church are sent up when Frankie tells us, "I'd love to be big and important and parade around with the red Confirmation catechism but I don't think I'll live that long the way I'm expected to die for this or that" (124). Another time when he is nine he says, "I feel sorry for the beautiful Protestant girls, they're doomed. That's what the priests tell us. Outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation. Outside the Catholic Church there is nothing but doom" (194).

Though the events are focalized mostly through Frank's eyes, at times the story is recounted as perceived by other characters, Frank's father being a case in point. When the MacNamara sisters for instance confront Malachy and coerce him into marrying their impregnated cousin, we are given insight into his way of reasoning:

> Malachy considered the pickle he was in. He had a few dollars in his pocket from the last job and he had an uncle in San Francisco or one of the other California Sans. Wouldn't he be better off in California, far from the great-breasted MacNamara sisters and their grim husbands? He would, indeed, and he'd have a drop of the Irish to celebrate his decision and departure. (8)

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[35] Since this is the memoir of a childhood, the distinction between the real author, the implied author and the adult narrator is blurry. In Lejeune's terms, the author and the narrator-protagonist of the story share an identity (*On Autobiography* 17), and the reader assumes that the views expressed by the narrator looking back on his early life greatly coincide with those of the writer.

Unfortunately for Malachy, the "drop of the Irish" (8) thwarts his plans of running away because he gets hopelessly drunk and "[awakes] on a bench in the Long Island Railroad Station, a cop rapping on his boots with a nightstick, his escape money gone, the MacNamara sisters ready to eat him alive in Brooklyn" (8). The ostensible comprehension for Malachy's plight is, of course, meant to be tongue-in-cheek and (playfully) critical. This becomes even clearer when, in the very next paragraph, the happenings are still recounted as Malachy sees them but with the addition that the narrator now refers to himself in the third person; we are informed that "Malachy married Angela and in August *the child* was born. In November Malachy got drunk and decided it was time to register *the child's* birth" (8, my emphasis). By ostensibly telling the story from Malachy's viewpoint but manipulating the text in such a way that he reveals his very own failings, McCourt manages to very effectively undermine his father's character. There are further instances where the events are apparently portrayed from Malachy's viewpoint just to have his actions reproved, such as when Angela goes to the Labour Exchange and claims her husband's unemployment benefit. The narrator tells us, "Dad is disgraced because a woman is never supposed to interfere with a man's dole money. He might want to put sixpence on a horse or have a pint and if all the women start acting like Mam the horses will stop running and Guinness will go broke" (82). The fact that "Guinness will go broke" (82) is an obvious reprimand and reveals the grown-up narrator's controlling hand in the narrative. His influence is also keenly felt when the reader is supposedly given insight into Malachy's reasoning behind leaving for England, for what the implied author is effectively doing is voicing his criticism of the Irish class system:

> What is Dad to do? There's a war on. English agents are recruiting Irishmen to work in their munitions factories, the pay is good, there are no jobs in Ireland, and if the wife turns her back to you there's no shortage of women in England where the able men are off fighting Hitler and Mussolini and you can do anything you like as long as you remember you're Irish and lower class and don't try to rise above your station. (246)

Other focalisers besides Malachy include Frankie's mother. But when the narrator portrays events as Angela sees him, his focalisation is more sincere, such as when he recounts the time she (heavily pregnant with Michael) goes in search of food for the family's Christmas meal. Although it is the child-narrator who is speaking, the angle of vision conceivably belongs to his mother when Frankie says, "I wish Dad would come and help us because Mam has to stop every few steps and lean against a wall" (107), and when he adds "Even if Dad came he wouldn't be much use because he never carries anything" (107). Angela's constant worry about how she is going to feed her family is voiced throughout the narrative. The following scene, in which she expresses her concern to her friend Bridey, is an example of how the narrator focuses the reader in on Angela's predicament and of how he sides with her:

> Mam tells Bridey, I don't know under God what I'm going to do. The dole is nineteen shillings and sixpence a week, the rent is six and six, and that leaves us thirteen shillings to feed and clothe five people and keep us warm in the winter.

> Bridey drags on her Woodbine, drinks her tea and declares that God is good. Mam says she's sure God is good for someone somewhere but He hasn't been seen lately in the lanes of Limerick.
> Bridey laughs. Oh, Angela, you could go to hell for that, and Mam says, Aren't I there already, Bridey?
> And they laugh and drink their tea and smoke their Woodbines and tell one another the fag is the only comfort they have.
> 'Tis. (162)

Whereas Malachy as focaliser is manipulated into revealing his own failings as a father and husband, Angela's standpoint is presented to make a case for the struggling wife and mother. Frankie's mother is additionally afforded space in the text to express her view of the clergy as corrupt and hypocritical. When the Church won't have him as an altar boy his mother declares, "'Tis class distinction. They don't want boys from lanes on the altar. [...]. That's what it is and 'tis hard to hold on to the Faith with the snobbery that's in it" (167). A few years later, when Frankie is turned away from the Christian Brothers' School, Angela says, "That's the second time a door was slammed in your face by the Church" (337) and she tells Frankie, "You are never to let anybody slam the door in your face again. Do you hear me?" (338). There are other women in the story who are likewise given the opportunity to lash out at the power of the Church and the State. An example is when the narrator perceives life through the eyes of Mrs. Spillane, who lives with her two handicapped children in one of the poorest lanes in Limerick. Mrs. Spillane takes the politicians to task for revelling in their power and in their riches when she says, "look at the state of us, de Valera in his mansion above in Dublin the dirty oul' bastard and the rest of the politicians that can all go to hell, God forgive me" (371). About the priests who preach humility and acceptance to the poor while feasting on the finest food themselves she says, "[they] can go to hell too and I won't ask God to forgive me for saying the likes of that" (371). Another woman whose subject position is conveyed is Nora Molloy. By seeing life through her eyes, the women of Limerick are given a voice, especially when she tells Angela

> No, I had to go and fall for a boozer with the charm, Peter Malloy, a champion pint drinker that had me up the pole and up the aisle when I was barely seventeen. I was ignorant, missus. We grew up ignorant in Limerick, so we did, knowing feck all about anything and signs on, we're mothers before we're women. And there's nothing here but rain and oul' biddies saying the rosary. I'd give me teeth to get out, go to America or even England itself. The champion pint drinker is always on the dole and sometimes he even drinks that and drives me so demented I wind up in the lunatic asylum. (69-70)

As can be gleaned from the foregoing discussion, McCourt's text gives expression to a number of voices. Considering how different characters are used as focalisers and how different narrators are interspersed and conflated, *Angela's Ashes* might be said to play with novelistic devices in a way far more reminiscent of fiction than of autobiography. This flirtation with fiction is, as intimated before, further enhanced by the way the characters are presented in the text. In the next subsection I subsequently turn my attention to characterisation and analyse how McCourt also incorporates this narrative element into his

life story. I argue that, in similar fashion to focalisation and narration, characterisation helps to give the memoir an overall novel-like structure and that it ultimately contributes to the text's unidentifiable status.[36]

Grandma Sheehan

In the above I have constantly referred to Frank's family and acquaintances as *characters*. This is because the way McCourt presents individuals in his memoir is akin to what a writer of fiction does when depicting the personae in a literary piece. In *Narrative Fiction*, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan posits that "'Story' designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, *together with the participants in these events*" (3, my emphasis). In terms of characterisation, Rimmon-Kenan (following Ewen) differentiates between "direct definition" on the one hand and "indirect presentation" (59) on the other. While the first entails "the authoritative voice" (60) using modifiers to describe an individual, the latter requires that the character type is deduced by readers themselves. Further, as far as indirect portrayal is concerned, Rimmon-Kenan identifies four different means by which a writer might depict a character, namely the way they act, the way they speak, the way they look and what they are surrounded with (61-67).

For the purposes of characterisation, McCourt avails himself of all the abovementioned fictional techniques. The upshot is that his characters are so colourful that we might, as Shannon Forbes has suggested, "expect to find [them] in a good novel" (482). For the purposes of illustrating how this is achieved I would like to single out one character and examine her depiction in detail. A personal favourite, and someone whose portrayal is well suited to the purpose of analysis, is Grandma Sheehan. She is described, in the manner of direct definition, as a "whirling dervish" (3), as someone who "barks" (277), who "screams [...] like a banshee" (152), and who "frowns" and "grumbles" (57). In addition to telling us she is ill-tempered, it is by implementing metaphor in the portrayal of her outward appearance that McCourt effectively conveys (by association) her severity. The narrator's very first impressions of her, just after they arrive from New York, is also indicative of her character:

> [...] there she was on the platform, Grandma, with white hair, sour eyes, a black shawl, and no smile for my mother or any of us, even my brother, Malachy, who had the big smile and the sweet white teeth. (55)

There is an obvious connection here between Grandma Sheehan's external features and her personality traits; while her "sour eyes" (and hence her surliness) are in stark contrast to Malachy's "big smile" and his "sweet white teeth" (55), her trademark black shawl is a trope for her irritability and simmering dark mood. In addition to her physiognomy, McCourt uses external objects in her immediate surroundings to depict her character. The most significant

[36] James Mitchell has argued that "In its style and its narrative [...] *Angela's Ashes* is not only more realistic than impressionistic, but at times reads more like a nineteenth-century novel than a memoir. [...]. The 'adult' voice of hindsight filtered through an ironic wisdom that begins McCourt's story before the child's narrative commences has a style familiar to all readers of nineteenth-century realist novels" (614).

is the all-pervasive imagery of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, of which she has a copy in her kitchen. She is directly linked with its iconography when we read, "Dad and Mam sit at the table and Grandma sits under the Sacred Heart with her mug of tea" (57). This image supplements her presence and is an example of what Rimmon-Kenan calls "trait-connoting metonymies" (66). To Frankie it symbolises her religious zeal and simultaneous lack of compassion, things he fails to understand.

Despite this predominantly negative portrayal, from her actions we can infer that Grandma Sheehan also possesses some good qualities. She is, for instance, patient with her son Pat who "was dropped on his head" (94) as a child. She also occasionally shows kindness to Frankie and his family: she pays their fare to return to Ireland, finds them a place to live in more than once, and takes care of the children when there is illness and death in the house (albeit begrudgingly). She is pragmatic and manages to get Angela out of her stupor when Oliver dies by telling her that "There are children dead [...] but there are children alive and they need their mother" (91). Inasmuch as she is not one-sided but displays positive as well as less agreeable traits she cannot, then, simply be dismissed as irascible, and is more rounded than might be thought at first.

In addition to how she acts and how she looks, the type of language she uses helps to sketch Grandma Sheehan's profile. First, what she says is frequently used to incriminate her. In the following scene (which takes place in the wake of Alphie's birth) the content of her speech reveals her self-righteousness:

> Grandma is there to help, and she says, That's right, no hope in heaven for the infant that's not baptized.
> Bridey says it would be a hard God that would do the likes of that.
> He has to be hard, says Grandma, otherwise you'd have all kinds of babies clamorin' to get into heaven, Protestants an' everything, an' why should they get in after what they did to us for eight hundred years?
> The babies didn't do it, says Bridey. They're too small.
> They would if they got the chance, says Grandma. They're trained for it. (205)

While what she says suggests ill temper and a lack of compassion, how she says it indicates that she is not to be taken too seriously. A more obvious example of the author having fun at his grandmother's expense is provided when Frankie gets sick on the day of his First Communion. Grandma Sheehan is incensed: "Look at what he did. Thrun up his First Communion breakfast. Thrun up the body and blood of Jesus. I have God in me backyard. What am I goin' to do? I'll take him to the Jesuits for they know the sins of the Pope himself" (143). In summary, not only the content but also the form and style of language are used in order to depict Grandma Sheehan as an individual who is both hard-hearted and humane. McCourt, then, uses both direct and indirect methods to characterise his grandmother. By telling and showing us what she does, where she lives, what she looks like, what she says and how she says it, he makes her come to life. This is ironic, of course, considering that she *was* alive or, at the very least, that her character was based on the actual, flesh-and-blood Mrs. Sheehan. Curiously, though we as readers are aware of this, we

still have the impression that Frankie's grandma is a colourful character from some gripping novel who has taken on the dimensions of a real person.

FID

McCourt uses language not only for the purposes of characterisation, but also to simulate speech patterns. To this end, there is a constant alternation between direct and indirect speech. An example can be found when Frankie is in hospital with typhoid fever. Here he makes friends with thirteen-year-old diphtheria patient, Patricia Madigan. Frankie never meets Patricia face to face, though, firstly because they are in different wards and communicate by conversing through a wall, and secondly because the nuns have forbidden "[any] talking between two rooms especially when it's a boy and a girl" (219). So Frank has to wait until everyone has left around before Patricia can read out lines of poetry to him. When a staff nurse finds them out, Frankie is summarily moved to a room well away from Patricia. The children nonetheless find a way of getting Patricia's books to Frankie by engaging Seamus, a cleaner, as their go-between. Seamus's reaction to the staff nurse's conduct illustrates the effect to which the different kinds of speech representation are used in the text. Within the space of a single paragraph, we move from indirect discourse, to some degree mimetic:[37]

> Seamus tells me she's a right oul' bitch for running to Sister Rita and complaining about the poem going between the two rooms, that you can't catch a disease from a poem unless it's love ha ha and that's not bloody likely when you're what? ten going on eleven? (225)

to free indirect speech:

> He never heard the likes of it, a little fella shifted upstairs for saying a poem and he has a good mind to go to the *Limerick Leader* and tell them print the whole thing except he has this job and he'd lose it if ever Sister Rita found out. (225)

to free direct discourse:

> Anyway, Frankie, you'll be outa here one of these fine days and you can read all the poetry you want though I don't know about Patricia below, I don't know about Patricia, God help us. (225)

One effect of interspersing different types of discourse is the creation of mimesis. Obviously, this is not a currency autobiography normally trades in. As Suzanne Nalbantian has noted, "The strict autobiographer writes on the assumption of a truth claim, as if his writings were to be received in the same manner as historical fact. There is the expected illusion of mimesis, with the 'I' in a referential position" (2). Thus, while in conventional autobiography happenings are related and accepted as fact by virtue of the autobiographical pact, in *Angela's Ashes* the writer frequently takes recourse to novelistic techniques to give us

[37] Andrew Laird writes that "With [mimetic indirect discourse] the diction does seem to be more the property of the original speaker than the narrator" (95).

the feeling that what we have on the page is an imitation of the events as they took place. This also seems to be James Mitchell's point when he claims that "memoirs [like McCourt's] partake in the narrative conventions of historiography and fiction, frequently employing what Roland Barthes calls a 'reality effect' to infuse their stories with a sense of verisimilitude" (608). But while Mitchell argues that "by unproblematically portraying the past as a series of uninterrupted recollections, McCourt's memoir operates through the principle of the reality effect" (610), it is my belief that it is especially the discourse in the passages describing the protagonist's memories that makes the reader accept the narrative as authentic.

The mimetic effect is enhanced by making individuals speak with a sociolect. The narrator repeatedly tells us that the reason he imitates speech is because he wants to reproduce the way a certain social class sounds. When he says that a maid might say "Oh, madam, madam, there's an urchin beyant that's makin' off with all the milk and bread" (350) he also tells us, "Beyant. Maids talk like that because they're all from the country" (350). Likewise, when Frankie gets some leftovers from a farmer's wife and she says, "Fry them eggs tomorrow when you come back from Mass in a state of grace for if you ate them eggs with a sin on your sowl they'll stick in your gullet, so they will" (351) he says, "She's a farmer's wife and that's how they talk" (351).

As well as social dialects there are—for the same mimetic reason—a number of foreign accents represented in the text. On his first day in the US, Frank is invited to a party. When the hostess says, "Come right in. Just in time for the pawty" (423) the narrator comments, "Pawty. That's the way [Americans] talk and I suppose I'll be talking like that in a few years" (423). The American accent is also transcribed at the start of the book when the McCourts are still in Brooklyn. One instance is when Frankie enquires after his father in a pub and the barkeeper asks, "Yeah, sonny, whaddya want? You're not supposeta be in here, y'know. […]. Who's your fawdah? […]. Malarkey?" (20). Immigrants living in America are, in turn, ascribed their own way of speaking. The Italian grocer says to Frankie, "Heah. Gotta bag o' fruit. I don' give it to you I trow id out. Right? So, heah, take the bag" (27). The McCourts' Jewish neighbours, on the other hand, sound quite different. After Frankie gets into a scrape with young Freddie, Mrs. Leibowitz says, "Freddie, Freddie, Frankie is here. Come out. Frankie won't kill you no more. You and little Malachy. Nice Chewish name, have piece cake, eh? Why they give you a Chewish name, eh?" (29).

There are other occasions when characters have their language imitated but where one has the impression that the way they speak, more than identifying them as a certain type, says something about who they are. Grandma Sheehan, as I have shown, is a case in point; Frankie's dad is another. McCourt imitates Malachy's slurred speech when he comes home after a night out and tells Angela, "Zeeze shildren should be in bed. Lishen to me. Shildren go to bed" (81). More than simply an imitation of the way all drunks talk, the diction of an inebriated man seems to complement Malachy's character. Said differently, the way he

speaks extends and underscores that part of him that pertains to an alcoholic husband and inept father. That language can add to a character can also be seen in the portrayal of Frankie's dancing instructor, Mrs. O'Connor. When she says "Frankie, dance, pick up your feet for the love o' Jesus, onetwothreefourfivesixseven onetwothree and a onetwothree" (158), the melodic counting out of the steps to the beat of the music is intermingled with the rest of her speech. Music and dance are her livelihood, and by including "onetwothree and a onetwothree" (158) they also become inextricably part of her character.

In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks discusses "how Flaubert's use of *style indirect libre* or 'free indirect discourse' […] thoroughly confounds the attribution of judgment and tone" (174). According to Brooks, this style of writing has conventionally been understood "as a technique for reporting speech and its characteristic patterns, rhythms, and key words without recourse to direct quotation and without overt intervention of an authorial-narratorial voice" (193-194). Brooks goes on to argue, however, that in Flaubert's case, more than simply achieving "sophisticated mimesis" (194) FID is used primarily as a way of deflecting authorial accountability. From the foregoing it might be gleaned that *Angela's Ashes* does exactly the opposite; indeed, what I have tried to show is that free indirect discourse creates the illusion of mimesis. In keeping with convention, McCourt then imitates the way people talk precisely in order to create the semblance of reality. The point is that he achieves mimetic effect *not* by means of the following the traditional autobiographical route but by taking recourse to fictional techniques. Autobiographical fact is thereby given fictional flavour, and the text becomes a site where the boundaries between truth and invention are blurred.

Time

As was the case with focalisation, characterisation and speech presentation, McCourt implements novelistic devices to arrange also the temporal structure of the text. Previously, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's discussion of characterisation in *Narrative Fiction* was invoked. Her work on time is equally instructive, not only as it provides a good overview of temporality in general but also as it can help us gauge the fictional dimension of McCourt's memoir. Following Genette's idea of "constancy of pace" (52), Rimmon-Kenan identifies summary, scene and ellipsis as some of the most widely used ways of manipulating pace in fictional texts. As concerns the first two techniques, she writes that "In *summary* the pace is accelerated through a textual 'condensation' or 'compression' of a given story-period into a relatively short statement of its main features" (53, italics original), while "In *scene* […] story-duration and text-duration are conventionally considered identical" (54, italics original). As far as the latter is concerned, "the purest scenic form is dialogue" (54). Whereas instances of both summary and scene are found in *Angela's Ashes*, it is the frequent use of dialogue which is most striking. The following extract, which describes one of the MacNamara sisters' visits

to the McCourts, provides a good example of how story- and text-duration can be consistent, and how this generates pace:

> Two big women are at the door. They say, Who are you?
> I'm Frank.
> Frank! How old are you?
> I'm four going on five.
> You're not very big for your age, are you?
> I don't know.
> Is your mother here?
> She's in bed.
> What is she doing in the bed on a fine day in the middle of the day?
> She's sleeping.
> Well, we'll come in. We have to talk to your mother. (40)

The episode above is extended to almost three pages of dialogue and followed by the letter the sisters write to Grandma Sheehan. Then the whole episode is brought to an abrupt end when several consecutive events are concentrated into one short summarising paragraph:

> Grandma Sheehan sent money to Philomena and Delia. They bought the tickets, found a steamer trunk at the St. Vincent de Paul Society, hired a van to take us to the pier in Manhattan, put us on the ship, said Good-bye and good riddance, and went away. (43)

While pace is maintained throughout the text by interspersing the modes of scene and summary, events are expedited by the frequent use of ellipsis, which Rimmon-Kenan defines as "The maximum speed [...] where zero textual space corresponds to some story duration"(53). Examples are numerous; at the start of the narrative, for instance, there is quick development as no text is allotted to the year between Frankie's christening and the birth of his younger brother. This is followed by another lacuna of two years, by which time the children are three and two years of age respectively. All of this happens within the space of three successive paragraphs and fits onto a single page:

> So [...] no more children, Angela. Are you listenin' to me?
> I am Philomena.
>
> A year later another child was born. Angela called him Malachy after his father and gave him a middle name, Gerard, after his father's brother.
> The MacNamara sisters said Angela was nothing but a rabbit and they wanted nothing to do with her till she came to her senses.
> Their husbands agreed.
>
> I'm in a playground on Classon Avenue in Brooklyn with my brother, Malachy. He's two, I'm three. (11)

Another clever way McCourt has of speeding up things is when he has Frankie say, "I'm seven, eight, nine going on ten" (161) and later, "I'm seventeen, eighteen, going on nineteen" (416). In the space of a line, McCourt here and elsewhere makes time disappear. To this end he not only employs ellipsis but also the historical present tense. Commonly

associated with fictional storytelling,[38] the narrative present is used to dramatic effect in *Angela's Ashes*. At the same time, by appropriating it for *memoir*, we find McCourt once again crossing the borders between literary genres and dabbling in the realm of fiction. This he often does discreetly, as can be seen in the example below where the narration moves from the child-protagonist and the historical present to the adult of the present time using the simple past to recall the thoughts he had as a boy, before jumping back to the historical present again:

> I look at my brother Malachy. Did you hear that? Our own egg of a Sunday morning. *Oh, God, I already had plans for my egg*. Tap it around the top, gently crack the shell, lift with a spoon, a dab of butter down into the yolk, salt, take my time, a dip of the spoon, scoop, more salt, more butter, into the mouth, oh, God above, if heaven has a taste it must be an egg with butter and salt [...]. (250, my emphasis)

While in this example moving in and out of the narrative present is inconspicuous, there are other instances where it is clear that the present tense is used to dramatise the events, such as the following excerpt in which the narrator recounts what happened to his Uncle Pat when he was a baby:

> After a night of drinking porter in the pubs of Limerick [Grandpa Sheehan] staggers down the lane singing his favourite song [...].
>
> He's in great form altogether and he thinks he'll play a while with little Patrick, one year old. Lovely little fella. Loves his daddy. Laughs when Daddy throws him up in the air. Upsy daisy, little Paddy, upsy daisy, up in the air in the dark, so dark, oh Jasus, you miss the child on the way down and poor little Patrick lands on his head, gurgles a bit, whimpers, goes quiet. Grandma heaves herself from the bed, heavy with the child in her belly, my mother. [...]. Get out of it. Out. If you stay here minute longer I'll take the hatchet to you, you drunken lunatic. [...].
> [...].
> He stumbles from the house, up the lane, and doesn't stop till he reaches Melbourne in Australia. (3)

By describing a time and occurrence from before he was born as if he were there, the writer takes on the role of omniscient narrator, and crosses over to the world of invention. But this is not all he achieves, as literary critics writing on the dramatic present in *Angela's Ashes* have noted. While Ivan Cañadas has posited that McCourt makes "poignant use of the historical present tense" (14), Peter Lenz has suggested that "the dramatic present [makes] the temporal and spatial distance to the narrated vanish for both [the narrator] and the reader" (412) and James Phelan that it enables McCourt to "[speak] in the voice of his former self" (67). These views are not in contradiction with one another since the narrative present tense does all of the above—one might say, as a way of summarising these different ideas, that the author makes skilful use of the historical present to increase the illusion of mimesis. Sentences like "My mother's whisper wakes me" (30), "It's December and it's freezing and we

[38] According to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, "Not infrequently [...] novelists have deployed the present tense to narrate action in the past. Usually referred to as the 'historical present', this move is thought to heighten the immediacy and dramatic impact of the narration [...]" (341).

can see our breath" (103), or "I wish the boys at Leamy's could see me *now*" (306, my emphasis) bring the past into the present and allow us to experience the events as they unfold. Together with summary, scene and ellipsis, it not only makes time disappear in front of our eyes, but also undergirds the way in which the text performs a balancing act between the realms of fact and fiction.

Reflection

Though many have written about episodes in their childhood,[39] Frank McCourt's is no ordinary recollection—by playing with the autobiographical pact and with reader expectations, *Angela's Ashes* manages to involve us affectively. When we pick up the book to start reading it, we notice it is subtitled a memoir. Consequently, we expect it to be a factual record of the author's life, narrated in the past tense. Little wonder, then, when some way through the text we are surprised to find that it features different narrators and focalisers, plays with characterisation, uses the free indirect speech and is partly written in the historic present; that is to say, that it has the structure of a novel. This apparent incongruity (a memoir in novelistic apparel) intrigues and unsettles us simultaneously. When, after doing some research, we finally ascertain that the memoir *is* autobiographical but that there have been protestations as far as its truth-value is concerned, we are left even more in the dark as concerns its status. Ultimately, we are never completely certain what to make of it, which means we are unable to unequivocally categorise the text.

In the Introduction, I invoked Barthes, Kristeva and Derrida for writing about the human desire to emplace people and things. Whenever we don't succeed, they say, we feel lost, unsatisfied and ill at ease. As we have seen, this is exactly how, on account of his social surroundings, the narrator-protagonist in *Angela's Ashes* feels. As a way of bringing together the three strands this chapter has mainly dealt with—namely the reader, the writer and the text—I want to claim that the subject's feeling out of place is made palpable by virtue of the text's generic homelessness. Being confronted with a narrative that is pitched somewhere between autobiography and fiction the reader, in other words, is left feeling ill at ease and in this way made to share the protagonist's malaise and discontent.[40]

Max Saunders has posited that "the fictionalization of the autobiographical facilitates readers' empathy" ("Autobiografiction" 1048). In light of the foregoing discussion, it is not difficult to see how this idea might be applied to *Angela's Ashes*. Concomitantly it is a narrative about exile, a condition of which Robert Edwards has said, "the link between event and affect seems inherent. We might speak superficially of 'undergoing exile,' but language

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[39] In her work on "the nature of some dominant narrative patterns that are common in autobiography" (3), Susanna Egan identifies the time when one is a child as the first phase in life narratives, "Rousseau and Wordsworth [being her] main exemplars for use of this myth of Eden in autobiography" (7).

[40] While James Mitchell agrees that the memoir affectively involves its readers, he offers a different interpretation: "Though [*Angela's Ashes*] condemns the horrors of the past, it displays an undeniable affection for the humor those horrors helped produce. This cognitive dissonance produces an almost visceral response. Most readers find the book either compellingly endearing or repulsively manipulative" (617).

inevitably carries us toward registering the feelings of suffering and enduring displacement from one's 'home'" (15). By choosing to narrate his exilic past in novelistic vein, McCourt makes doubly sure that he taps into our emotions. Put another way, exile and its effects are conveyed by dint of the text, even if the events described therein took place on the other side of the Atlantic and half a century before the time of writing.

As I argue in the next chapter, it is through the text besides that exile's legacy is carried across not only vast stretches of land and long periods of time but also generations. Further, it may manifest itself for reasons other than the social and the political, and take on more violent forms of uprooting. With *Fugitive Pieces* we move not only from self-imposed to enforced exile but also from autobiography narrated as if it were fiction to fictional autobiography. Thus, while the use of literary devices makes incontrovertibly categorising McCourt's narrative an impossibility, Anne Michaels's text enjoys a precarious generic status by virtue of its ontology. Fiction in autobiographical guise and a historical novel to boot, it adds a further layer of complexity to the synthesis of fact and fantasy found in autobiographical texts written at the turn of the century. As it addresses related issues while at the same time developing the subject of exile as well as that of experimental autobiography, *Fugitive Pieces* is an interesting study to follow on *Angela's Ashes*. Having said that, while the traits the works share—their setting in the 1940s, the theme of displacement, the interplay of fact and fiction and their publication date to name but a few—guarantee continuity, it is the differences between them that bring new insights into the nature of autobiography and autobiography writing, and hence it is these matters that I will turn to next.

Chapter 2

Resurrecting the Dead in Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*

> The dead read backwards,
> as in a mirror. They gather
> in the white field and look up,
> waiting for someone
> to write their names.
>
> —Anne Michaels, "What the Light Teaches," *Miner's Pond*[1]

War is exile by other means.[2] That is to say, the violent uprooting and dispersion of a people is attendant on the circumstances of warfare. This was as much the case in medieval Europe as it was in Rwanda and Bosnia in the twentieth-century, or Sudan and Syria in the twenty-first. Hellish as they are, it is impossible to single out any specific instance of war and its ensuing mass human migration.[3] Nevertheless, for the purposes of this chapter, it may be ventured that the exilic event which has become *the* historical and cultural fixation in society today, and which certainly stands for one of mankind's darkest hours, is the diaspora[4] which took place during and after World War II.[5] In addition to the six million European Jews who lost their lives between 1939 and 1945, another estimated two hundred and fifty thousand were left displaced by the war and forced to leave their native lands.[6] It was in their new homes (mainly North America and Israel) that these escapees would struggle to make sense of a past that threatened their livelihood as well as their humanity. Here they would execute a balancing act between trying to forge a new life in the present while never forgetting the wrongs they suffered during the war. Here they would eventually pass on the trauma of persecution and degradation to their children. And here second and third generation Jewish

[1] This verse from part five of "What the Light Teaches" is also quoted by John Berger in his "Introduction" to the Bloomsbury edition of *Fugitive Pieces*.

[2] This is, of course, an adaptation of the well-known saying by Carl von Clausewitz that "War is a mere continuation of policy by other means" (124), later famously inverted by Michel Foucault to "politics is war pursued by other means" (*The History of Sexuality* 93).

[3] For an overview of exile and mass human migration through the ages, see Lagos-Pope, *Exile in Literature* (7-11).

[4] Allatson and McCormack point out that "In Jewish discourses [...] the terms exile and diaspora are not normally regarded as synonymous" (13).

[5] Dan Diner notes that "Although the conspicuous presence of the Holocaust in public discourse may easily be traced from the late 1970s onwards, and its impact became particularly manifest in the 1980s, its significance for universal historical consciousness and moral standards became irrevocable only after 1989" (67). D.M.R. Bentley similarly commented in the late nineties that "there has recently been a redoubling of efforts to memorialize the Holocaust" (5).

[6] See Ner LeElef "World Jewish Population," for more demographic information on Jewish communities around the globe.

sons and daughters would suffer the consequences of their heritage, caught in the double bind of trying to break free from the ghosts of the past while at the same time being keenly aware of their role as guardians of that legacy.

Anne Michaels's fictional memoir *Fugitive Pieces* addresses these issues by showing how war leads to exile in its various manifestations. These include the dispossession of familiar and familial surroundings as well as the loss of national identity and sense of self. Above all, the text exposes exile as depriving subjects of their voice. At the same time, it attempts to eradicate the subsequent and debilitating silence, for writing is championed as having the ability to help mend the lives of those affected by war. Putting past experiences into a coherent narrative is not only seen as a way of helping the individual come to terms with the past or deal with the burden of exile's legacy but also as a very effective means of making silenced voices heard, and especially of ensuring that memories—however painful they be—are not committed to oblivion but brought into the open.

In this chapter I contend that, through her experimentation with the autobiographical form, Anne Michaels manages to vividly convey feelings of angst and uneasiness associated with war and dislocation. To this end she furnishes the narrative with an intricate and fragmented structure and makes it constantly vacillate between the real and the fictional world. This constant moving around and conflation of the imaginary and the real unsettle and affect readers to such a degree that they are made to share in the protagonists' sense of displacement and unease. Concomitantly I argue that *Fugitive Pieces* thematises the importance of preserving the life narratives of those who survived as well as those who perished in the war. I moreover claim that the text performs the very thing it proclaims—by taking the form of memoir, *Fugitive Pieces* literally enacts the sustaining of discarded life-stories and silenced voices. As such the text performs a rescue action as it exhumes forgotten life stories and emplaces them in the canon of Life Writing, Exile and War.

Exile and war

In the previous chapter I pointed out that Frank McCourt's exile was voluntary only to a certain extent. Despite the dire social circumstances that left him with an array of empty choices, his dislocation cannot by any measure, however, be described as *violent*. In contrast the principal protagonist in *Fugitive Pieces*, Jakob Beer, suffers a most aggressive form of uprooting. The narrative opens with a disturbing scene as it chronicles Jakob's furtive escape from the Nazis in war-torn Poland. Hiding in a closet while his parents are slain and his sister forcefully removed, the child manages to get away. After the soldiers leave, he flees his home and finds refuge in the bogs of the Iron Age settlement of Biskupin. Here, as he "[surfaces] into the miry streets of the drowned city" (5), he is rescued by Athos, a Greek archaeologist charged with digging up the site. Athos takes Jakob home with him to Greece where the boy is slowly brought back to life:

> On the island of Zakynthos, Athos—scientist, scholar, middling master of languages—performed his most astounding feat. From out of his trousers he plucked the seven-year-old refugee Jakob Beer. (14)

Abruptly and violently rent from his home, Jakob at first "[cannot] conceive of any feeling stronger than fear" (19) in his new surroundings. He literally clings to Athos, "[following him] from one room to the other" (20). Reminiscent of Malachy McCourt who would entertain Frankie and his brothers with his stories and make them momentarily forget their hunger, Athos tells anecdotes to steer Jakob away from the painful events of the past. Jakob tells us, "Because of Athos, I spent hours in other worlds, then surfaced dripping, as from the sea" (29). Under the care of his "koumbaros" (14), Jakob gradually starts feeling safe and secure in his new home. He describes Athos's house as "a crow's nest, a Vinland peathouse" (29), in other words, a place analogous to his bog-like hideout in Biskupin where he felt "safely buried" (8).

Jakob's life on Zakynthos, and the fact that he feels safe there, emphasises the important role geographic space plays for the émigré. It suggests that if the refugee is to be restored to life, it is essential that the native land be substituted with a place where they feel welcome and protected. This is also the point Athos is trying to make when he asks "What is a man [...] who has no landscape? " and answers, "Nothing but mirrors and tides" (86). Far more than merely denoting the contours of a physical terrain, land is what feeds the soul.[7] Athos accordingly believes that there is a strong connection between the material and the abstract world, and that by giving Jakob a new home, he might be able to rekindle his spirit. For his part, Jakob realises that his godfather is trying to give him a land he can call his own; he says "Even as a child, even as my blood-past was drained from me, I understood that if I were strong enough to accept it, I was being offered a second history" (20).

When Jakob is older he comes to appreciate the interaction between the physical and spiritual realm more, and begins to understand that feeling at home in a new terrain depends on how much that place resonates with one's self. While he realises he will always be a foreigner in his adoptive country, he also says that "From the first, I felt at home in [the Greek] hills, with broken icons hovering over every abyss, every valley, *the spirit looking back upon the body*" (164, my emphasis). The synthesis of spirit and matter finds its way into several of his descriptions of the land, and might be extended to a metaphorical interpretation of the shelter and comfort Jakob finds in Greece. He describes his home in Zakynthos as "a high and windy place full of light" built on "solid rock," a place where he "[learns] to tolerate images rising in [him] like bruises" (19). That Jakob closely identifies with his new home also becomes apparent when one sees the island's typography as analogous to his own self. It is not hard to read in an island "scarred by earthquakes" and

[7] This idea is not new to the field of environmental psychology, which Bell et al. define as "the interrelationship between behavior and experience and the built and natural environment" (7).

exhibiting a "barren west and fertile east" (26) the scars of Jakob's own past, or recognise the warring forces of Eros and Thanatos within him.[8]

Greece, then, might not be his country of physical birth but it is where Jakob's spiritual rebirth is conceived. Considering his traumatic removal from Poland, the child settles in remarkably well in his new home. Whatever he achieves in terms of stability, however, is soon disrupted when Athos gets a teaching position in Canada after the war and Jakob once again finds himself dislocated. On arriving in the cosmopolitan city of Toronto, Jakob experiences "a stunning despair" (91) and initially shows no interest in getting to know his new surroundings. Later he is nonetheless coaxed into exploring the city with Athos, and as they discover sites of "lakes and primeval forests" (102), Athos tries to explain to Jakob that *all* men are strangers to this world. Jakob tells us, "On these walks I could temporarily shrug off my strangeness because, the way Athos saw the world, every human was a newcomer" (103). Nevertheless, in the long run, Jakob never really manages to feel at ease on the North American continent. This does not mean that he does not try to fit in. When he meets and marries Alex after Athos passes away, Jakob initially appears to have found a new form of stability. But the cracks in their relationship can be discerned right from the start, and the inverse of Athos's dictum that "Love makes you see a place differently" (82) is, unfortunately, also true for them. For Jakob feels like an outsider as soon as Alex moves in and it is only a matter of time before the inevitable happens and their marriage falls apart.

Alone in Canada Jakob experiences the truth of Athos's sentiment that "In xenetia—in exile […] in a foreign landscape, a man discovers the old songs. He calls out for water from his own well, for apples from his own orchard, for the muscat grapes from his own vine" (86). Considering that Jakob sees Greece as his spiritual abode, it is not surprising that it is Athos's ancestral home in Idhra that he chooses to return to after the turbulent events in Toronto. Here, in the tranquility and shelter the hills offer, Jakob can process the death of Athos and the separation from Alex. To help him come to terms with what has happened, Jakob spends his time translating and writing, and only occasionally goes back to Toronto to visit his friends Maurice and Irena. On one such an occasion Jakob meets and falls in love Michaela, and marries her shortly after. While he felt alien in Alex's company, he tells us he has "a feeling of homecoming" (178) in Michaela's presence and that sleeping with her, "Every cell in [his] body [had] been replaced, suffused with peace" (178). In the end, "It is not on Idhra or on Zakynthos but among Michaela's birches that [he felt] for the first time safe above ground, earthed in a storm" (189). Despite Jakob's professing that his sense of belonging is tied to Michaela rather than any geographic locality, the couple decide not to remain in

[8] As Laplanche and Pontalis point out, Freud first mentions the death and life instincts in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (97, 241). They write that whereas "The tendency of the life instincts is to create and maintain ever greater unities" (241), the death drive is aimed at "[bringing] the living being to the inorganic state" (97). Initially the forces of Thanatos are "directed inwards and tend towards self-destruction, but they are subsequently turned towards the outside world in the form of the aggressive or destructive instinct" (97). These conflicting forces can be observed in Jakob's character. As is later discussed in more detail, Jakob's desire for self-punishment (evinced in his self-reproach about the past and his clinging to the dead) is contrasted to his desire for love and for living life in the present.

Toronto after they are married but to return to Idhra. But back in Greece, just as things seem to be finally working in his favour, Jakob and his young wife are subjected to an ironic fate: only months after they first meet, their new-found happiness is cut short as both of them are fatally wounded in a car accident in Athens.

Though Jakob's death only takes place more than halfway through the book, its diegetic significance is foregrounded when the reader is proleptically informed on the very first page that

> Poet Jakob Beer, who was also a translator of posthumous writing from the war, was struck and killed by a car in Athens in the spring of 1993, at age sixty. His wife had been standing with him on the sidewalk; she survived her husband by two days. (2)

Further the prologue indicates that what is about to unfold is the memoirs which, "Shortly before his death, Beer had begun to write" (2). Tellingly, the introduction to the memoirs ends with a quote by Jakob that "A man's experience of war [...] never ends with the war" (2). The allusion here, to begin with, is the chain of geographic displacements set in motion by the condition of warfare. As we have seen, these instances of dislocation Jakob is subjected to require some adjustment, not least of which to the unfamiliar terrain of his new surroundings. The exilic effects of war, however, do not cease with the individual's physical uprooting, for in his new country the refugee is also confronted with the mentality of a foreign culture whose ways and traditions he does not understand and with a language he does not speak. As will become apparent in what follows, linguistic and social alienation exacerbate Jakob's experience of exile and his sense of unease. Further they prove, in their own right, the maxim that an individual's involvement in war does not come to an end when the fighting on the battlefield is over.

The conundrum of language

Because Jakob is relocated on separate occasions, he is put through the process of learning a new language and getting to know a new culture not once but twice. In the first four years of his exile from Poland he learns to master Greek. That the child is aware of how a foreign language can make one feel ill at ease with oneself is evident when he tells us, "I longed for my mouth to feel my own when speaking [Athos's] beautiful and awkward Greek, its thick consonants, its many syllables difficult and graceful as water rushing around rock" (22). When they go to Canada the process repeats itself and Jakob finds his vocal apparatus once more unwilling to cooperate. While he expresses his desire "to cleanse [his] mouth of memory" (22) when learning Greek, he says of English, "The numb tongue attaches itself, orphan, to any sound it can: it sticks, tongue to cold metal. Then, finally, many years later, tears painfully free" (95). The difference between Zakynthos and Toronto is that while Jakob could acquire Greek within the protected environment of Athos's home, he is completely exposed to the trials and tribulations of learning a new language in Canada. Here he

discovers to what extent not knowing the language can make one feel socially excluded. A case in point is when he comes home one day, clearly upset. On being questioned Jakob tells Athos that he had stormed out of a store because the shopkeeper had said to him, "We have suspicions" (94). And although Athos's investigations reveal that the man had, in fact, said *chickens* and not *suspicions,* Jakob feels so shaken and humiliated by the episode that he never goes back to the shop.

In order to improve his English, Jakob tries to come up with puns since "they [penetrate] into the heart of comprehension, a real test of mastery of a new tongue" (100). Next he moves on to writing poems, "hoping that in [his] sonnets the secret of English would crack open under [his] scrutiny" (100). When Jakob finally turns his attention to translating, he muses about the fact that the translator, poet and immigrant face a similar plight where language is concerned—all three, he says, "try to identify the invisible, what's between the lines, the mysterious implications" (109). Here one might add that the immigrant recognises the importance of learning the nuances of the host country's language in order to fit in and hence —like the translator—to "[move] from language to life" (109).[9] It might be, then, that the main reason Jakob is anxious to learn first Greek and then English is that he believes it will help him to feel less excluded in his new home, and protect him from further dislocations. However, there is another, less conspicuous motive behind his desire to master these languages, namely that they can offer him protection from what happened in the past. This can be gleaned when he says, "I tried to bury images, to cover them over with Greek and English words" (93). Jakob's desire is especially deep for English:

> The English language was food. I shoved it into my mouth, hungry for it. A gush of warmth spread through my body, but also panic, for with each mouthful the past was further silenced. (92)

Jakob, it seems, wants to immerse himself in other languages because he believes they will shield him from the traumatic events of the past. At the same time he is (paradoxically perhaps) concerned that he might forget the past altogether. So, in order not to forget his past experiences while at the same time being sheltered from them, he starts writing his memoirs in a language other than his own:[10]

> And later, when I began to write down the events of my childhood in a language foreign to their happening, it was a revelation. English could protect me; an alphabet without memory. (101)

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[9] On the interconnectivity between translation, language and life, in "The Task of the Translator" Walter Benjamin argues that "Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential for the works themselves that they be translated; it means, rather, that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability" (254). Further Benjamin argues that the interrelation between the translated and original text is comparable to life; he writes "Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife" (254).

[10] In the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari, one might argue that while Jakob "deterritorializes" (37) the past by neglecting his mother tongue, he "reterritorialize[s]" (37) it again through writing about it in another language;, see Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (37-38).

Jakob believes that writing in foreign languages can act as a filter and help a person deal with the traumatic events of the past.[11] The inevitable consequence of favouring a different language to one's mother tongue is, of course, that the latter will become neglected. This is also true for Jakob whose vernacular seems to be in danger of being forgotten. To counter this, Athos presciently encourages the young émigré to speak Yiddish and makes him study the Hebrew alphabet while they are still on the island. But in spite of Athos's efforts, as Jakob is slowly drawn into other languages, Yiddish becomes just another faded memory. And whilst Jakob is, on the one hand, grieved by the fact that his native language becomes "a melody gradually eaten away by silence" (28) as "[his] tongue [learns] its *sad* new powers" (25, my emphasis), he is simultaneously, as has been pointed out, desirous that Greek and English take over his linguistic faculties.

The unconscious, one might venture, has more similarities with language than its structure.[12] For although Jakob tries to protect himself from the past by indulging in foreign languages, and despite the lapse of years in which he neither hears nor speaks Yiddish, his mother tongue will not be repressed. Catching a mere word one night while out on a stroll triggers the memory of a song his mother used to sing, and with that the image of her brushing his sister Bella's hair (109). Another time, in the Jewish market of Toronto, he has an even more disturbing experience—when he hears the merchants speaking Yiddish he tells us that "[he] listened, thin and ugly with feeling" and that he sensed "fear and love intertwined" (101). Hearing the language of his childhood might be gratifying but it also revives painful memories.[13] Jakob, then, finds himself confronted with the double bind of linguistic homelessness: while he wants to indulge in Greek and English, he is simultaneously distressed by the fact that his mother tongue is being relegated to the periphery.[14] Thus it appears that losing one's language not only leads to social exclusion in the new homeland but

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[11] The notion that writing can afford the subject with the perspective he or she needs to put to rest the ghosts from the past is not new. While Iain Chambers has posited that "writing opens up a space [...] It involves putting a certain distance between ourselves and the contexts that define our identity" (*Migrancy* 10), Svetlana Boym has argued that "Some things could only be written in a foreign language; they are not lost in translation, but conceived by it. Foreign verbs of motion could be the only ways of transporting the ashes of familial memory. After all, a foreign language is like art—an alternative reality, a potential world" (260).

[12] The allusion here is to Lacanian theory. Terry Eagleton writes that "Lacan [...] regards the unconscious as structured like a language. This is not only because it works by metaphor and metonymy: it is also because, like language itself for the poststructuralists, it is composed less of *signs*—stable meanings—than of *signifiers*" (*Literary Theory* 146, emphasis original).

[13] Concerning the refugee's ambivalent feelings about language, Devleena Ghosh has noted that on the one hand, "language is the one tangible residue of homeland that the exile can carry, keeping the memories and roots alive. On the other hand, fluency in the language of one's adopted home can enable the making of meaning and transition to the new culture and society easier" (285).

[14] Realising that one's past is slipping away and hence being "thin and ugly with feeling" (101) is not an uncommon experience among émigrés. In "Auto/bi(o)graphy," Stefan Herbrechter cites Eva Hoffmann as a prominent case where being excluded from one's native language has led to unease and self-doubt. Accordingly, Hoffmann's *Lost in Translation: A New Life in Language* (1989) shows how "The uprooting of the Polish child from her culture and language, forced into learning the language of the other [...] causes a crisis in her identity and her relation to reality" (320).

also to internal conflict and to being alienated from one's self, as is evident in the case of Jakob Beer.[15]

On the outside

Because foreign languages offer him the distance he needs to protect himself from the past Jakob decides to write his memoirs in English. The question is why he returns to Greece to do so; i.e. would it not make sense to remain in an English-speaking country if that is to be the language of the text? The answer, it seems, lies in the social alienation and concomitant unease Jakob experiences in Canada. Indeed, Toronto turns out to be a place where Jakob struggles to adjust not only to the topography of the land and language of the people but also to the way things are done.

When he first arrives in Toronto, Jakob finds Canadian traditions strange, from what people eat to how they go out to dine on their own. These initial feelings of being out of place and of not fitting in remain with Jakob throughout the time he stays in Canada. The extent to which he feels marginalised by society is epitomised by the lack of social contact he has with kids his own age. While he finds it hard to make friends at school, he declares that he cannot even contemplate having a girlfriend since he would not know how to explain his past and his peculiar lifestyle to her. The fact of the matter is that he and Athos would be living in virtual (self-imposed) social exile were it not for the other "strays"(96) such as Constantine, Joseph and Gregor who sometimes come to visit them. And while he feels fairly at ease around these grown-up friends, Jakob is very awkward among his peers. In the company of Alex's friends he especially "[feels] maggoty with insecurities; [he] had European circuitry, [his] voltage wrong for the socket" (132). In addition there is the concern that living among Canadians, "Speaking [their] language, eating strange food, wearing [their] clothes" (126) will gradually succeed in obliterating his past. Finally it is these thoughts, together with feelings of alienation and insecurity, which induce him to go to Idhra and compile his memoirs there.

Feeling out of place then does not only have to do with the language one does or does not speak, but also with the traditions and conventions of a place and its people, with how they function and how they think. This is Jakob's experience of things as much as it is that of the narrative's other protagonist, Ben. A teacher at the University of Toronto, Ben gets to know Jakob (or more precisely Jakob's work)[16] through his close friend Maurice. When Jakob dies, it is Ben who goes to Idhra in search of his journals. It is also he who is responsible for publishing Beer's life story and who introduces the reader to Jakob's memoirs on the opening page. While he, then, undoubtedly plays a diegetically significant role, Ben's character is

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[15] It is ironic that none of the languages Jakob commands can help him write his way out exile and isolation. Considering the dense language Jakob uses to relate his life story, it might be argued that his inability to escape his sense of not-belonging is reflected in the way his experiences are narrated. That is to say, just like the words on the page are uncomfortably out of place in memoir (and arguably more at home in poetry), Jakob is not at ease in any of the places or spaces he inhabits.

[16] Though the two protagonists do come face to face at a party one evening, from Ben's recounting of the events it seems that it is his wife rather than he himself who engages in conversation with Jakob.

more than just functional in the Barthesian sense of the word.[17] That is to say, Ben's life narrative undergirds the text's focus on exile and displacement in its own right.

The offspring of Holocaust survivors, Ben grows up in Toronto. Oscillating between life at home with his refugee parents and life on the outside, Ben never really feels at ease in either world. The main reason for this has to do with his parents' apparently odd behaviour. To start with, Ben feels his parents' eccentricities set them apart from the other families in the area. He tells us, "Our neighbours soon understood my parents wanted privacy" (243)—and this to such an extent that once when the Humber flooded, they ignored one of their neighbours' warning to evacuate the house. Further he says that the reason he never took home any friends is that "[he] worried that [their] furniture was old and strange" and admits that "[he] was ashamed by [his] mother's caution and need as she hovered" (229). That he is acutely aware of the stark contrast between the two worlds he lives in also comes to the fore when he talks about the time he introduced Naomi to his parents and describes how "She blundered in with her openness, her Canadian goodwill, with a seeming obliviousness to the fine lines of pain, the tenderly held bitterness, the mesh of collusions, the ornate restrictions" (248-249).

One cannot, of course, put down their idiosyncratic ways to the mere fact that Ben's parents are immigrants who are used to doing things differently where they come from. Instead, their overprotection and decision to keep to themselves are directly ascribable to the legacy of war. Ever since Ben's parents were interred in a concentration camp during the second world war, they have lived in constant fear of being found out and killed. A legitimate fear, certainly, but one which has alienating consequences for their son who has to navigate between life at home and life on the outside. One event which marks this dichotomy is when Ben is allowed to attend the Canadian National Exhibition as a schoolboy. While he avows to "never [having] felt such exhilaration, such unmediated, anonymous belonging as that day in the crowd" (227), the true impact of the day is only felt when he shows his mother all the free gifts he received. Horrified that Ben had taken them "improperly" (228), his mother tells him to hide them from his father.

From this time on Ben feels more isolated than ever from his parents. He starts coming home late deliberately after school even though he knows that this is causing his mother profound distress. Though Ben, then, is not insensitive to his parents' suffering and understands why they behave the way they do, he still wants to liberate himself from their oppressive presence. This need to be free ultimately leads to his moving out of their home on the eve of his Sophomore year. After this he very rarely sees them but when he does go home for the occasional visit, he notices how the rift between them is becoming insurmountable. Because he feels unable or unwilling to do anything about it, he makes a conscious decision not to contact them for weeks on end, realising full well the anxiety that this is causing. The

[17] In "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," Roland Barthes argues that "a narrative is never made up of anything other than functions: in differing degrees, everything in it signifies. This is not a matter of art (on the part of the narrator), but of structure; in the realm of discourse, what is noted is by definition notable" (89).

irony is that Ben does not thereby manage to attain the happiness he is seeking. In fact, as he starts feeling more and more unhappy the less he sees his parents, he finally comes to the realisation that "[his] efforts to free [himself] had created a deeper harm" (231).

For all his effort to escape familial displacement, and with that the legacy of exile and war, Ben finds himself hopelessly steeped in misery and isolation—while he feels awkward in his parental home,[18] he is not entirely at ease in a life which excludes them either and is not as happy outside the family set-up as he thought he would be. What is more, Ben cannot successfully keep the outside and the familial world apart so that the estrangement he experiences at home is extended to the relations he has with other people, notably his wife. The fact that he grows up in a home "rotted out by grief" (233) where "love was like holding [one's] breath" (233) finally takes its toll on his relationship with Naomi and is the reason he fails to return the love she shows towards him and his family. His driving her out of his life can therefore be seen as an indirect consequence of the war, of his parents' exile and of the grief-stricken place from where he comes. And although the book ends with Ben saying "I see I must give what I most need" (294), i.e. love, the alienation he suffers in terms of interpersonal and familial relations is positively crippling.

Untermensch

The aim of this thesis is to foreground ways in which the autobiographical genre is appropriated in order to affectively convey feelings of unease and isolation inflicted by the condition of exile. With this in mind, I have been looking at manifestations of displacement in *Fugitive Pieces* and have argued that the text depicts the inextricable link between war and exile. In this section I want to enlarge upon the effects of war by showing how it strips its victims of any pride they might have in their cultural heritage. As will become apparent, this often leads to the subject questioning his or her sense of self, which in turn gives rise to issues of doubt and internal estrangement.

In the Epilogue to *Pluralism and Identity: Studies in Ritual Behaviour*,[19] Platvoet and Van der Toorn postulate that an individual's selfhood is bound up with that of the society he or she belongs to. They point out the "fallacy that there is such a thing as a true and authentic identity" (352), while simultaneously positing that "identity derives from the group to which [humans] belong" (352). Further they argue that, "Identity is […] by definition social identity; and the combination of the two terms a pleonasm. […]. Without other human beings around us, i.e. divorced from society, the individual is no one" (352). Since the individual's sense of

[18] On this matter, Barbara Estrin has argued that "Michaels reimagines the adoptive interlude […] In *Fugitive Pieces*, it is not the return of children to their biological parents that is idealized. Rather, it is the adoption itself" (285).

[19] Amartya Sen reminds us of the fact that "identity can be a complicated matter" (xi). He argues that "In our normal lives, we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups—we belong to all of them […] Each of these collectivities, to all of which [a] person simultaneously belongs, gives her a particular identity. None of them can be taken to be the person's only identity or singular membership category" (xiii). In *Fugitive Pieces*, Jakob's sense of self should then be seen as constituted by the different groups he belongs to, among which the Jews.

self is so closely connected with the group, it can be concluded that having one's group identity challenged will leave the subject doubting his or her sense of being and self-worth. This notion is also put forward in Anne Michaels's novel—*Fugitive Pieces* emphasises not only the way in which our individuality is tied up with that of the group but also comments on the consequences this might have. More specifically, it looks at how subjects are made to relinquish their dignity and humanity because they happen to belong to a certain race. It thematises the degradation and dehumanisation of particularly Jews during the war, and intimates that an individual's selfhood will be plunged into crisis when their people's collective identity is under threat.

There are a multitude of references in the book to Jews being treated as less than human. To begin with, the text depicts the way in which the National Socialist policy of *Entjudung* was executed.[20] When the narrative starts we learn that Jakob's family was brutally killed and the Jewish Polish community they belonged to all but eradicated by the Germans. Then the focus shifts to Greece and to the Jews on Zakynthos who had to flee their homes when Nazi soldiers invaded the island. We are told that when the Jewish population of the ghetto disappear, "They slip into the hills, where they wait like coral; half flesh, half stone. They wait in caves, in the sheds and animal stalls of the farms of Christian friends"(40). Further they are said to have concealed themselves "In the crawlspaces of double ceilings, in stables, pigsties, chicken coops" (45). The conspicuous use of animal imagery in relation to Jews resurfaces when the narrator compares Jews that were killed and interred in Auschwitz with the cave paintings of animals in Lascaux (143), and reinforced when we are informed that "the German language had annihilated metaphor, turning humans into objects" (143).

By using animals and objects as images, the narrative comments on the reification and dehumanisation of Jews during World War II. At the same time it invokes the ignominious practice of portraying Jews as parasites, vermin and other undesirable life forms.[21] Toni Kaes points out that starting in medieval times, rats in particular were used to connote anti-Jewish sentiments:

> In caricatures and illustrations Jews were associated with rats as carriers of infectious diseases. Fritz Hippler's Nazi propaganda film *Der ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew*, 1940), one of the most rabid anti-Semitic productions of Joseph Goebbels's Ministry of Propaganda, cuts between images of Eastern Jews and rats to symbolize the spread of the "Jewish Plague." (109)

As far as the figure of "the eternal Jew" is concerned, Wolfgang Benz notes in "*Der ewige Jude"—Metaphern und Methoden nationalsozialistischer Propaganda* that it did not

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[20] Peter Longerich provides an in-depth study of the politics and circumstances leading up to the Holocaust. In *Holocaust—The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (2010) he discusses the Nazi state's *Judenpolitik* and gives a detailed breakdown of the methodical wiping out of Jews during the second world war.

[21] This might be explained by the fact that the Nazis saw the Jews as the abject, in the Kristevaen sense of the word. According to Noëlle McAfee, "The subject finds the abject both repellant and seductive and thus his or her borders of self are, paradoxically, continuously threatened and maintained. They are threatened because the abject is alluring enough to crumble the borders of self; they are maintained because the fear of such a collapse keeps the subject vigilant" (49-50).

originate in the Third Reich but had been around since the early Middle Ages (9).[22] In the nineteenth century, Ludwig Börne wrote about the general hostility toward Jews, and it was this pejorative image of "the eternal Jew" that was taken up by the Nazis in their anti-Semitic campaign (11-13). This was exemplified in the film *Der ewige Jude* (1940),[23] directed by Fritz Hippler, Head of the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. Benz writes that, according to Hippler, what Hitler wanted to prove with the film was that the Jews were a nation of parasites that had to be separated from the rest of humanity (140). To this end, viewers are informed that Jews commonly live in dirty, dilapidated and insect-infested houses. Further their peregrinations are compared to those of rats who originated in Asia and who took illness and pestilence wherever they went.[24] The idea advocated by the Nazis was, in brief, that Jews were a form of subhuman species or *Untermensch*. According to Benz this term, understood as the antipode to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, was not coined by the Nazis either but had been in use since the 1920s to disseminate anti-Jewish and anti-Slavic propaganda (22). *Fugitive Pieces,* in depicting a world in which "a Jew could be purchased for a quart of brandy, perhaps four pounds of sugar, cigarettes" (45), comments on the little value such ideology attaches to human life. It shows a world where German soldiers, convinced of the other's inferiority, kill a Jewish woman point-blank in the presence of her family and friends, and where a Jewish child is "thrown into the air and shot like a tin can" (46). The narrator, in an effort to make sense of it all, sets out fascist ideology and its justification in devaluing human life as follows:

> Nazi policy was beyond racism, it was anti-matter, for Jews were not considered human. An old trick of language, used often in the course of history. Non-Aryans were never to be referred to as human, but as "figuren," "stücke"—"dolls," "wood," "merchandise," "rags." Humans were not being gassed, only "figuren," so ethics weren't being violated. (165)

In response to the decree that Jews were not allowed to have pets, the narrator posits, "how can one animal own another? How can an insect or an object own anything? Nazi law prohibited Jews from buying soap; what use is soap to vermin?" (166). However, he then goes on to deconstruct Nazi thinking and claims that "If the Nazis required that humiliation precede extermination, then they admitted exactly what they worked so hard to avoid admitting: the humanity of the victim" (166). In other words, the fact that they were treated as inferior proves more than annihilates the humanity of the prisoner, and shows that "the torturer knew in an instant of recognition that his victim was not a 'figuren' but a man" (166).

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[22] In addition to the "eternal Jew" the image of the "wandering Jew" has also been prominent since medieval times. In the late nineteenth century, the Anglican Priest Sabine Baring-Gould wrote that "The earliest extant mention of the Wandering Jew, is to be found in the book of the chronicles of the Abbey of St. Albans" (5).

[23] An abridged version of *Der ewige Jude* (with English subtitles) can be seen on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ow2EMn4e57A>

[24] In her essay on *Fugitive Pieces*, Annick Hillger writes about the idea of "the poisoned well" (Michaels qtd. in Hiller 35) used in the text. She notes that "The image also reverberates with the accusation that Jews faced in the Middle Ages: Jews were said to poison wells and thus cause the Plague. The following centuries of branding the Jews as those who bring decay and disease to existing societies [was] a development that culminated in the pseudo-scientific racial theories of the Third Reich […]" (35).

Though the narrator (Jakob) is able in hindsight to see that behind the degradation and slaughter of his people lies a perverted ideology, belonging to a group classified as *Untermensch* does not leave him unaffected.[25] That he feels dehumanised because of his race can be inferred from the fact that he uses animal imagery also in relation to himself. When describing his escape from the Nazis he tells us "I was safely buried [...]. Panting like a dog. My arms tight against my chest, my neck stretched back, tears crawling like insects into my ears" (8). The first time Athos comes across Jakob, he is said to have "squirmed from the marshy ground" (5) and to have "screamed into silence the only phrase [he] knew in more than once language [...] dirty Jew, dirty Jew, dirty Jew" (13).[26] About this incident, Athos says to Jakob, "[when] your mud mask cracked with tears [...] I knew you were human, just a child" (12).

The discussion above raises numerous questions about subjectivity, racism, ideology, propaganda, and the interaction between the individual and society (to name but a few). Obviously, the scope of this thesis is not such that it can pay due attention to the complexity of these issues. Nonetheless, as a way of summarising, one can say that the aforementioned aspects of war unite and lead to a kind of exile which is not geographical or linguistic but has to do with the subject's search for selfhood. As evinced in the case of Jakob, because our individual sense of self is so closely bound up with that of the group, their being treated as sub-human can make us feel uncertain about our own humanity and self-worth, and ultimately lead to a crisis in identity. This means that war is injurious in more insidious ways than "just" depriving victims of their land and their language. Indeed, the type of exile alluded to here is one that makes the individual doubt his very subjectivity, an exile that combines with dislocation and exclusion to make the refugee's life one of desolation, despair and utter misery.

"Postmemory"[27]

Through Jakob's memoirs we are mimetically and diegetically made to see that "A man's experience of war [...] never ends with war" (2), but that it is perpetuated in the form of exile, exclusion and self-doubt. This means that our past experiences are not something we can put behind us. History in this sense never lets go but is something we carry with us all our lives. The way in which the past bears upon the present is, then, a leitmotif in the text. Yet there is more at stake in *Fugitive Pieces;* indeed, what Anne Michaels's text illustrates so poignantly

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[25] As I argue later on, the narrative does not leave Jakob and the Jewish nation at large completely defeated and disempowered. Indeed, in the midst of the Nazi's racist onslaught, it manages to offer some form of redemption by giving Jakob the opportunity to compile his memoirs, thereby exposing Nazi ideology and reaffirming Jewish dignity as a whole.

[26] Even in the relative safety of Athos's house on Zakynthos, Jakob tells us while his godfather was working he would "lay at his feet like a cat" (20)—the animal imagery admittedly more benign but still decidedly *not* human. Interestingly, the animal-image resurfaces in the second part of the narrative when Ben describes his father stroking his hair as "feral" (215). But rather than denoting dehumanisation, the reason for using animal imagery here is to link the two father figures in Ben and Jakob's story.

[27] Marianne Hirsch, "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile" 420

is that history also has a profound impact on the future. To be more precise, the text sets forth that the past returns (with a vengeance) and is revisited on those who are yet to *be* born:

> History is the poisoned well, seeping into the groundwater. It's not the unknown past we're doomed to repeat, but the past we know. Every recorded event is a brick of potential, of precedent, thrown into the future [...]. This is the duplicity of history: *an idea recorded will become an idea resurrected*. Out of fertile ground, the compost of history. (161, my emphasis)

The passage above expounds the idea that history is that which will be revived. By dint of the fact that *Fugitive Pieces* is set against the backdrop of the second world war, the specific events of the past that are to be brought back to life and "thrown into the future" (161) will of necessity relate to the genocide of the Jews. Marianne Hirsch has written about how the events and experiences of the past—and specifically those associated with the Holocaust—are carried over to successive generations. In her essay "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile" she talks about her own experiences as the daughter of exiled Jews. Hirsch remarks she and her peers alike have a "sense of exile from a world [they] have never seen and never will see, because it was irreparably changed or destroyed by the sudden violence of the Holocaust" (419). Although the offspring of refugee parents are permanently removed from their parents' recollections of the past, and from their experiences and sufferings, Hirsch nonetheless believes that

> the power of mourning and memory, and the depth of the rift dividing their parents' lives, impart to [the children of Holocaust survivors] something that is akin to memory. [...]. I have chosen to call this secondary, or second-generation, memory "postmemory." [...]. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can neither be fully understood nor re-created. (420)

Fugitive Pieces takes up the concept of postmemory. It shows that there is a need among Holocaust survivors to convey to their children the collective history of their people in addition to involuntary or subconsciously transmitting their fears and anxieties. The text further intimates that the necessity of postmemory has to do with the fact that past events also need to be attested to by the next generation if they are to have any significance at all:

> The event is meaningful only if the coordination of time and place is witnessed. Witnessed by those who lived near the incinerators, within the radius of the smell. By those who lived outside a camp fence, or stood outside the chamber doors. By those who stepped a few feet to the right of the station platform. *By those who were born a generation after*. (162, my emphasis)

In Michaels' narrative, the urge to give the past value is epitomised in Ben's parents. In spite of the fact that Ben grows up on a different continent and in a new era, at home the war is never far away. In fact, Ben's parents make a conscious effort to expose their son to the

suffering of Jews during the Holocaust; he tells us, "Instead of hearing about ogres, trolls, witches, I heard disjointed references to kapos, haftlings, 'Ess Ess,' dark woods" (217). In an attempt to make his people's history also that of his son's, Ben's father uses visual images to confront him with the reality of the war:

> The images my father planted in me were an exchange of vows. He passed the book or magazine to me silently [...]. What was I to make of the horror of those photos, safe in my room with the cowboy curtains and my rock collection? He thrust books at me with a ferocity that frightened me, I would say now, more than the images themselves. What I was to make of them, in my safe room, was clear. You are not too young. There were hundreds of thousands younger than you. (218-219)

In addition to being left disturbed and perplexed by these images, the episode above illustrates some of the reasons for Ben's alienation from his father who, in his anger, keeps his son at arm's length. The estrangement between father and son is further brought on by Ben's belief that he is not good enough for his dad, that "[he] had less power to please him than a stone" (219). In an effort to get closer, the child tries to be as tough as his dad and sets himself a mission—he decides to make his way through the forest at night with no light to guide him. He reasons, "If my father could walk days, miles, then I could walk at least to the road. What would happen to me if I had to walk as far as my father had? I was in training" (220). Although he carries out this ritual three times, Ben has to finally admit that his nightly adventure has not removed his anxiety. Thus one might say that the fear Ben has been bequeathed from his father is not something he can shake off but that it has indelibly become part of who he is.

Ben is not only is weighed down by his parents' trauma and fear but also by their lack of (showing) emotion. As noted before, because he inherits his parents' inability to openly display affection, Ben finds it almost impossible to maintain any type of intimate relation, be it familial or otherwise. For the absence of affection and intimacy in his family Ben blames the insidious nature of history which, he says, "[leaves] a space already fetid with undergrowth, worms chewing soil abandoned by roots" (233). Further he posits that "history only goes into remission, while it continues to grow in you until you're silted up and can't move" (243). History, then, has a way of subtly and stealthily infiltrating the subject, rendering him paralysed and helpless, incapable of escaping the burden of his parents' past.

In her paper comparing the art of exile in *Fugitive Pieces* and Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, Elisabeth Bronfen explores the idea of "transgenerational haunting" ("Die Kunst des Exils" 385). She claims that because of his parents, Ben can never feel at home in his home country, and that he consequently suffers from a"second hand" (389) form of exile. Ben, to rephrase, is bequeathed with the legacy of banishment and flight; that is to say, though his experiences of the war and the persecution by the Nazis are vicarious they are also very real. This is why he can say "My parents' past is mine molecularly" (280), and that he can avow "Naomi [cannot] stop the soldier who spat in my father's mouth from spitting into mine" (280).

The living dead

The type of exile war gives rise to does not stop with first-generation émigrés but is carried over to their children and to their children's children. Because the legacy of exile is perpetuated on both a physical and an emotional plane, first and second generation expatriates alike are bound to be subjected to feelings of anxiety and malaise. Before moving on to ascertain precisely how writing might express and even help ease such emotional distress, I want to explore a final manifestation of exile, namely war trauma.

Nowhere is the synthesis of war, exile and unease evinced more strikingly than in the case of trauma. But what exactly is meant by war trauma? In *Memory, War and Trauma*, Nigel Hunt writes that "[the traumatized] are ordinary people who cannot bear their memories of what has happened" (2). They are then also usually diagnosed as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (59), and show typical PTSD symptoms including "intrusive distressing recollections [...] Recurrent distressing dreams [...] illusions, hallucinations and dissociative flashback episodes [...] Difficulty in falling or staying asleep" (52-53). Hunt's findings correlate with those Dominick LaCapra makes in his essay "Holocaust Testimonies: Attending to the Victim's Voice." LaCapra namely notes that "In traumatic memory the event somehow registers and may actually be relived in the present, at times in a compulsive repetitive manner. But it returns in nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety-attacks, and other forms of intrusively repetitive behavior" (212).

To bring all of this in relation to *Fugitive Pieces,* the notion that war trauma occasions the subject to repeatedly experience the past is underscored by having Jakob continuously relive the violent killing of his people. Despite his efforts to lay the past to rest, the dead keep reappearing while he is asleep *and* while he is awake. To start with, alone in his bed "at night, [his] mother, [his] father, Bella, Mones, simply rose, shook the earth from their clothes and waited" (93). The ghastly aspect the dead acquire in his dreams is indicative of the extent to which Jakob is haunted by their suffering and pain:

> They waited until I was asleep, then roused themselves, exhausted as swimmers, grey between the empty trees. Their hair in tufts, open sores where ears used to be, grubs twisting from their chests. The grotesque remains of incomplete lives, the embodied perplexity of desires eternally denied. They floated until they grew heavier, and began to walk, heaving into humanness; *until they grew more human than phantom* and through their effort began to sweat. The strain poured from my skin, until I woke dripping with their deaths. (24, my emphasis)

The Freudian claim "That the dream actually has a secret meaning, which proves to be a wish-fulfilment" (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 55) is well known. However, considering that he is literally haunted by the dead in his dreams, one cannot help but wonder how this might be true for Jakob. An anecdote in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which tells the story of a father who falls asleep and has a dream shortly after his child passes away, might help clarify the issue. The story goes that in his dream the man sees "*the child [...] standing by his bed, clasping his arm and crying reproachfully: 'Father, don't you see that I am*

burning?'" (Freud 535, emphasis original). Startled, the father comes to and discovers that one of the candles in the child's room has toppled over, and that it has scorched his arm. Considering that there was a fire right next door to the room the man was sleeping in, Freud asks why he dreamed on instead of waking up immediately. He points out that in the dream "The dead child behaves as though alive" (354) and postulates that it was in order to have his child with him that the father was not roused from his sleep. Freud concludes, "The dream was given precedence over waking reflection because it was able to show the child still living" (354).

Jakob's dreams, it seems, might be explained in a similar way for by dreaming of the dead he too can keep them alive. Thus, though they are maimed and almost menacing in their reproof, they are not entirely dead. It is, then, because the dead in his dreams "[heave] into humanness" (24) that one can say Jakob's dreams become a wish-fulfilment. But the dead, as intimated before, are not only kept alive at night. While they acquire a human-like quality in Jakob's dreams, when he is awake they literally intrude into the present and become part of his reality. A case in point is when as a child "the room [fills] with shouts" (43) when he hears about Jews who were tortured and killed in the war. Writing his memoirs on Idhra many years later, he still senses the presence of the dead so keenly that he succumbs to their sounds. About this time he writes, "the cries [...] grew louder, filled my head. I moved closer inside myself, didn't turn away. I clutched the sides of the desk and was pulled down into blueness. I lost myself, discovered the world could disappear" (157).

This insistence of the dead to acquire physical presence is nowhere manifested as hauntingly as in the figure of his sister. As was the case with the Jews of the concentration camps, Bella's dream-image is grotesque. Hers is "[a] round face, a doll's face, immobile, inanimate, her hair floating behind her" (44), "Her skin [...] coming apart at her elbows and behind her ears [...]. The cuts on [her] head [...] burning [...]. Every raw place on her scalp [bursting] with cold" (167-168). In keeping with the other living dead, she too becomes lifelike not only in his sleep but also while he is awake:

> Athos didn't understand, as I hesitated in the doorway, that I was letting Bella enter ahead of me, making sure she was not left behind. [...]. Awake at night, I'd hear her breathing or singing next to me in the dark, half comforted, half terrified that my ear was pressed against the thin wall between the living and the dead, that the vibrating membrane between them was so fragile. I felt her presence everywhere, in daylight, in rooms I knew weren't empty. I felt her touch on my back, my shoulders, my hair. (31)

Bella, it seems, will not let go. Pithily Jakob writes, "Bella clung. We were Russian dolls. I inside Athos, Bella inside me" (14). One reason for Bella's persistence is to be found in the way she disappears. Not knowing what happened to her after the German soldiers took her away, Jakob ceaselessly replays the possible scenarios of her fate. "Night after night," he tells us, "I endlessly follow Bella's path from the front door of my parents' house. [...]. I collect facts, trying to reconstruct events in minute detail. Because Bella might have died anywhere along that route. In the street, in the train, in the barracks" (139). Such is the extent to which

Jakob is haunted by her death that when Alex moves in he detects her presence in his wife's every move—Alex's gown becomes "[his] sister's ghost" (125), "Alex's hairbrush propped on the sink: Bella's brush. Alex's bobby pins: Bella's hairclips […]. Bella writing on [his] back: Alex's touch during the night. Alex whispering goodnight […] Bella reminding [him] that even Beethoven never stayed up past ten o'clock" (140).

Though Jakob in his internalisation of Bella displays symptoms of melancholia,[28] he realises that he needs to let go of the dead if he wants to be restored to the present. On fleeing his house after seeing his parents' corpses he experiences "flesh transforming to spirit" (7), and subsequently senses "The dead […] above [him], weird haloes and arcs smothering the stars" (7). This allows him to posit, in a vein reminiscent of Blanchot, that the dead "are everywhere but the ground" (8), that is, though they are buried and out of sight they are very much present.[29] While hiding in the bog he feels his mother's presence and understands that "She was stopping to say goodbye and was caught, in such pain, wanting to rise, wanting to stay" (8). At the same time, he knows that he should let her go, that it would be "a sin to keep her from ascending" (8). Hence his assertion that to dream his sister into being is to "blaspheme" (167), and that "To remain with the dead is to abandon them" (170). He maintains, "The soul leaves the body instantly, as if it can hardly wait to be free" (7) and believes "that it was as painful for [the dead] to be remembered as it was for [him] to remember them" (25). Jakob, in other words, fears that because he is unable to let go of the dead he is haunting them as much as he is being haunted by them. He consequently realises that the reason Bella wants to "push [him] back into the world" (170) is not only so that he may seize the present but that she may be set free.

War and exile combine to traumatise Jakob: in his sleeping as in his waking hours, the dead haunt him to such an extent that the borders between the real and the imaginary world become blurred. Because he keeps seeing the dead everywhere he goes, he cannot live his present life to the full. At the same time, since he is not dead himself, he cannot join the realm of the deceased. This means that Jakob is relegated to the margins of both the real *and* the unreal world, his spiritual exile superimposing itself on his geographic displacement. The unease Jakob experiences is therefore not only in consequence of his nightmares and flashbacks, but also because of the fact that he does not feel he wholly belongs to either the world of the living or of the dead, but that he is exiled somewhere between life and death.

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[28] In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) Freud writes "The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment" (244). While these characteristics also come to the fore in mourning, the difference is that "The disturbance of self-regard is absent in mourning" (244). Freud postulates, "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (246).

[29] In "Two Versions of the Imaginary," Maurice Blanchot posits that a corpse cannot be confined to its coffin. He writes, "The spot [the cadaver] occupies is dragged along by it […] We know that at 'a certain moment,' the power of death causes it to leave the fine place that has been assigned to it. Even though the cadaver is tranquilly lying in state on its bier, it is also everywhere in the room, in the house. At any moment, it can be elsewhere than where it is, where we are without it, where there is nothing, *an invading presence*, an obscure and vain fullness" (84, my emphasis).

Writing to remember

Jakob, then, struggles to come to terms with the fate that befell his people. Troubled at night by grotesque images of the tortured and the slain, and haunted during the day by the physical proximity of the dead, he is unwilling to lay their ghosts to rest. While towards the end of his life he finally manages to let go of the past,[30] this does not mean that he forgets or obliterates it. Indeed, remembering the past turns out to be the main reason for compiling his memoirs. In this section I want to delve deeper into this and other reasons that the text suggests why it is important to write one's life narrative. What foremost becomes clear in the course of the narrative is that the past needs to be recollected if one wants to go on living in the present. While there are people like Alex who think that by forgetting the past we are returned to life, there are clear indications that repressing events will slow down and hinder the healing process. Thus, though remembering is "impossible, absurd" (30), Jakob believes forgetfulness is a serious threat to one's self; as he sees it, "each time a memory or a story slinks away, it takes more of [one] with it" (144).

The notion that life might be seized by recalling the past is also put forward by Athos. Athos makes Jakob study the Hebrew alphabet and tells him, "It is your future you are remembering" (21). He moreover encourages Jakob to put to paper the recollected events of his childhood. "Write to save yourself" (165) Athos tells him, all the while attempting to transmit to Jakob "the power of language to restore" (79). The text then seems to suggest that language should be wielded in order to deal with the past. The idea of constructing a coherent narrative to make sense of one's traumatic past is not new, and was also briefly addressed in the Introduction. Considering, however, the significant role that writing plays in the healing process in *Fugitive Pieces*, a few apposite remarks on the relationship between writing and trauma do not seem inappropriate here. In this respect, Smith and Watson have posited that "Narrators suffering from traumatic or obsessional memory may see the act of telling as therapeutic in resolving troubled memories, acknowledging how the process of writing has changed the narrator and the life story itself" (28). Likewise, in her work on the role trauma played in the memoir boom of the late twentieth century, Leigh Gilmore notes that "at the same time language about trauma is theorized as an impossibility, language is pressed forward as that which can heal the survivor of trauma" (*The Limits of Autobiography* 6). This is certainly the case in a text such as *Fugitive Pieces* which celebrates "the power of language to restore" (79)—not only by making Jakob understand that writing will allow him to process past events, but also that by compiling his memoirs in English he will have the distance he needs to revisit the past.

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[30] Jakob ultimately does find his place in the world. However, this is not until much later in life when he meets Michaela. With her help the dead are finally put to rest, and the real and the imaginary no longer conflated. Though he tells us that observing his wife's baking, "carry [his] memories" (192) and remind him of his mother and sister, Jakob can clearly keep these thoughts apart from the reality which is Michaela. More significantly, he no longer fears going to bed, for instead of nightmares "Night after night [his] happiness wakes [him]" (194).

The key role writing plays in Jakob's life is further underscored by focusing the reader in on the intimate relation he has with language. When Ben starts reading his poetry, he is struck by the fact that what Jakob wrote made up such a big part of who he was. He asks, "How could it be otherwise, for a man who claimed to believe so completely in language? Who knew that even one letter—like the 'J' stamped on a passport—could have the power of life or death" (207). Considering these findings, it is not surprising that Ben is tempted to believe (as perhaps is the reader) that it was "language itself [which] had freed [Jakob]" (207). Ben realises, however, that this is not completely accurate since it is ultimately Michaela's love that accounts for Jakob's finding inner peace.

While it might be true for Jakob, in Ben's case it is not loving someone but rather the very act of writing which helps him to deal with the past. To be more precise, it is through writing his life story in quasi-epistolary form that Ben is finally restituted—by addressing Jakob, Ben can put his life story into a coherent narrative, and in this way get to know his self. The idea of a talking cure, with Jakob taking over the role of analyst and Ben of analysand, is put forward by Ben himself. When he and Naomi are introduced to Jakob for the first time, Ben is affected by Jakob's ability to listen and not condemn:

> Tell him, I thought, tell him everything.
> You listened, not like a priest who listens for sin, but like a sinner, who listens for his own redemption. What a gift you had for making one feel clear, for making one feel—clean. As if talk could actually heal. (208)

Ben's professed scepticism that talking can heal is in contrast with what is accomplished by his relating his life story. As the concluding paragraphs indicate, it is through giving an account of his past that he is finally able to make sense of his life and that he comes to understand that he needs to love in order to be loved:

> But *now* [...] I see something else. My mother stands behind my father and his head leans against her. As he eats, she strokes his hair. Like a miraculous circuit, each draws strength from the other.
> I see I must give what I most need. (294, my emphasis)

The realisation that he should bequeath that which he wants to receive is enhanced by letting the last sentence stand alone and by having it conclude the narrative. In terms of content, the fact that Ben returns to the point where he started out from (i.e. his parents) suggests a circularity. This is supported by the simile in which his mother and father are compared to "a miraculous circuit" (294). On the one hand, this indicates a repetition or endless loop, and as such underscores the notion that children inherit their parents' past. On the other, it invokes the idea that something has come full circle, thereby indicating that we have reached the moment of anagnorisis not only in terms of Ben's narrative but also of the memoir as a whole.

Recognising what it is that he should do, however, does not come easily to Ben. As did Jakob, Ben gains self-knowledge by working through the distressing experiences of the past.

Interspersing the pursuit of Jakob's notebooks with personal anecdotes, Ben posits, "The memories we elude catch up to us, overtake us like a shadow. A truth appears suddenly in the middle of a thought, a hair on a lens" (213). But it seems that memories—painful as they might be—must be recalled and dealt with if one wants to live life in the present. Much like "The misery of bones that must be broken in order to be set straight" (254), the wounds of the past apparently need to be opened up if they are ever to heal.

At first, the painful memories and wounds of the past seem to relate exclusively to the anger Ben harbours towards his parents. As the narrative progresses it becomes clear, however, that he feels guilty as much as he feels angry about the estranged relationship with his mother and father. Though Ben realises that his parents have (in some ways) failed him, he also feels that he has failed *them*. After they pass away he reproaches himself for not having had more compassion and comprehension for the fact that their ordeal had made them into the people they were. Referring to the incident in which his father confronts him with a rotten apple which he had tossed into the trash can, Barbara Estrin argues that "In the actual scene, Ben is the victim of his father's SS ("ess ess") bullying. He is the oedipal sacrifice. But in his memory, Ben puts himself in the subject position of his father. He is Laios, killed by the son he was. And the guilt does not leave him" (286-287). Ben's guilt also comes to the fore when he thinks about the time he started taking longer routes to get home after school and when confesses, "I'd like to think I didn't know at the time how cruel this was. When my father and I left the apartment in the morning, my mother never felt sure we'd return at all" (229). Finally he shows compunction about shutting his parents out of his life when he goes to university, which he says "had given them [...] a new scar" (231). Ben's guilt about not being there for his parents is also evinced in his dreams:

> My dreams are silent. I watch my father lean over the table to kiss my mother, she's too frail to sit up long. I think: Don't worry, I'll comb your hair, I'll carry you from the bed, I'll help you—and realize she doesn't know me.
> In dreams, my father's face [...] contorts [...]. In dreams I can't stop his disintegration. (249)

In addition to showing remorse about his parents, Ben regrets the way he treated Naomi. Though he loves her, she is made to bear the brunt of the complicated and imperfect relationship he has with his parents. He is annoyed by the fact that she seems to unconditionally love them and is also jealous of the bond she has with his mother. Displeased with his parents for raising him not to be able to give love as freely as Naomi, Ben starts to take his anger out on her. At the same time he is worried that he will lose her; "What would I do without her?", he asks and admits, "I began to be afraid. So I picked fights with her over everything" (242). When it finally transpires that Naomi knew his parents had had two children before the war while he himself was kept in the dark, Ben has a good excuse to push her out of his life. It is only later when he goes to Idhra that he is able to sort out his emotions by writing about them and that he confesses, "I wasted love, I wasted it" (286).

All of this is to say that writing affords Ben the opportunity to express his regrets and to help him deal with his feelings of guilt. But Ben is not the only person in the text who has the need to expiate. In fact, guilt—or more precisely, a strong sense of responsibility towards the past—is also a motivating force behind Jakob's writing. What troubles Jakob so exceedingly is the fact that while he survived the war, there were millions of Jews who did not:

> While I hid in the radiant light of Athos's island, thousands suffocated in darkness. While I hid in the luxury of a room, thousands were stuffed into baking stoves, sewers, garbage bins. (45)

Thinking of his fellow-Jews who were killed in the gas chambers, he addresses the unborn children whose mothers died while giving birth and implores them, "Forgive me, you who were born and died without being given names" (168). Such feelings of remorse are not uncommon among refugees—referring to the work Leszek Kolakowski has done on the subject, Martin Tucker writes, "The refugee may harbor guilt for having fled and survived, while those left behind [...] may have suffered imprisonment or death" (xvi). This is certainly true for Jakob who has such a strong sense of responsibility for having escaped while others perished that he feels it is his duty to remember them. As I show later in this chapter, it is precisely the act of writing which makes it possible for Jakob to make amends and appease his conscience. Providing him with a means of ensuring that those "who were born and died without being given names" (168) are never forgotten, language allows Jakob to fulfil his moral obligation towards the dead. In this way he is able to move a few steps closer towards putting the past to rest and towards finding inner peace.

Silence

Writing their memoirs enables Ben and Jakob to express their remorse about the past while at the same time helping them to achieve spiritual wholeness. But writing is also a way of giving a voice to the oppressed and the subjugated. Indeed, the novel not only suggests that language might eradicate silence, but also *enacts* the notion of using the written word to lend a voice to victims of war. There is a manifest omnipresence of voicelessness in the text; both Ben and Jakob, for instance, are negatively affected by silence. We are first introduced to the menacing nature of silence when Jakob relates how he hid in the closet while Nazis stormed their house and killed his parents. Since Jakob only hears these events as they take place and does not actually see them happening, he necessarily relies on his aural senses. This is why he says, "My deepest story must be told by a blind man, a prisoner of sound. From behind a wall, from underground" (17). Safe in his hideout, the boy is traumatised by the sounds of soldiers forcing their way into the house and assaulting his family:[31]

[31] The daughter of a Holocaust survivor herself, Adrienne Kertzer talks about "The trauma of listening" (204) in her essay on *Fugitive Pieces*. She writes that "Reading Jakob as Michaels's figure for the image-haunted listener of the second generation, I hear a [...] story [...] in tension with the romantic and redemptive story that makes [*Fugitive Pieces*] a bestseller " (201).

> The burst door. Wood ripped from hinges, cracking like ice under the shouts. Noises never heard before, torn from my father's mouth. *Then silence*. (7, my emphasis)

This final lack of sound turns out to be even more terrifying—and terrorising—than any of the noises Jakob actually perceives for the dead (as I have shown) inexorably and relentlessly haunt him for the best part of his life. Notably it is the silence and uncertainties surrounding Bella's death which plague Jakob the most. "Filled with her silence, [and having] no choice but to imagine her face" (10), Jakob starts seeing Bella everywhere he goes, in his sleeping as well as in his waking hours. This dreaming up of his sister and his parents, and concomitant conflation of the past and the present, finally take on such dimensions that he finds it virtually impossible to let go of the past or surrender to the present.

Jakob is concerned that he will lose his family to an all-encompassing silence; he tells us that fear would take hold of him when he thought about the fact that acquiring English meant that "the past was further [being] silenced" (92). Considering his anxiety about the past being eradicated by silence, it is ironic that Jakob at first believes "[his] life could not be stored in any language but only in silence" (111), and that he wishes "[he] could disappear simply by stillness" (18). Later, however, he discovers that remaining silent is more harmful than helpful, and consequently turns to writing about the past in order to save himself. Thus he finally comes to realise that only once language replaces silence can one start to make sense of the past:

> But I did not know how to seek by way of silence. […]. I thought of writing poems this way, in code, every letter askew, so that loss would wreck the language, become the language.
> If one could isolate that space, that damaged chromosome in words, in an image, then perhaps one could restore order by naming. […]. So in poems I returned to Biskupin, to the house on Zakynthos, to the forest, to the river, to the burst door, to the minutes in the wall. (111-112)

With Jakob we are made to see that while language resuscitates, silence incapacitates and disempowers. This notion is reinforced in the second part of the book by having Ben's character introduce a somewhat different (if equally debilitating) manifestation of silence. Similar to Jakob, Ben realises full well the havoc silence can wreak; he tells us that "[he] was born into absence" (233), and this mainly for two reasons. First, due to the ordeal they suffered at the hands of the Nazis during the war, his parents are so to speak constantly in hiding, lest they be detected by the authorities and imprisoned. Second, though they demand that he know all about the Holocaust, Ben's parents are loath to tell him their personal stories and hence remain secretive about the life they had before they moved to Canada. As a result, silence and secrets engulf them as a family and characterise the relationships they have with each other.

An example of how silence wrecks relationships can be seen in the way Ben's father takes recourse to music (in lieu of language) in order to communicate with his son. Ben says of his

father, "He used orchestrates—other people's arms and hands and breath—to signal me; a wordless entreaty, all meaning pressed into chords" (215). Ben's mother, on the other hand, (initially) still shares some of her secrets with Ben, and tells him—in confidence—some of what they went through during the war. Later, however, "The code of silence became more complex […] There were more and more things to keep from [his] father" (223). In the end, as a consequence of the silence enforced at home, Ben is completely estranged from his parents:

> There was no energy of a narrative in my family, not even the fervour of an elegy. Instead, our words drifted away […]. My parents and I waded through damp silence, of not hearing and not speaking. It soaked into the furniture, into my father's dank armchair, a mildew in the walls. We communicated by slight gestures, surgeons in an operating theatre.
>
> (204)

From the above it is clear that Ben becomes endowed with his parents' silence, much in the same way we saw him inheriting their inability to display affection. In fact, so much does Ben internalise their silence that when he meets Naomi he considers the absence of speech to make up an important part of their relationship. He describes Naomi's silence as "usually wise" (208) and says, "I was often thankful for this" (208). In the end, though, Ben is made to see that living a life of silence is not conducive to having a close relationship, but that it has actually alienated him from his wife. As I have intimated before, it is only once he discovers that language is a force in its own right and starts writing about his past that Ben gains this type of insight and that he realises the damage that has been done. It is only then that he can say that he has "wasted love" (286) and that he "must give what [he] most [needs]" (294).

Collective-ness

The debilitating effects of silence do not only bear upon Jakob and Ben but concern all those affected by the war, and foremost the Jews detained and killed in concentration camps. Their persecution and silencing make up an integral part of the text and allusions to the Holocaust saturate the narrative. To begin with there is a focus on Poland as we learn how the Nazis tortured and killed Jakob's family and friends. The text also depicts how, in other parts of the world, Jews were subjected to a similar fate—while in Odessa "thirty thousand Jews were […] doused with gasoline and burned alive" (26), thousands of kilometres away, in Greece, the Nazis equally persisted in their fanatic efforts to exterminate the Jews. We are told that while most of the Zakynthos Jews were able to "slip into hills" (40) when the Germans invaded the island, those that were *not* were rounded up and taken away to concentration camps, as were the Jews living on other Greek isles such as Corfu and Crete (41-43). In addition to Poland, the Ukraine and Greece, mention is made of the Jewish persecution in, amongst others, the Czech Republic, Belarus, Italy and Germany. Precisely because the witch hunt for Jews was taking place not only in these countries but all over the continent, Jewish fugitives "were

filling the corners and cracks of Europe, every available space" (45) as they looked for a place to hide.

Of all the disturbing details surrounding the incarceration and murder of these European Jews—what they were doing when the soldiers arrested them, where they were taken, and whether they were torn asunder—Jakob singles out "the precise moment of death" (140) as the most troubling, and is "obsessed [to know]—were they silent or did they speak? Were their eyes open or closed?" (140). Because he "couldn't even begin to imagine the trauma of their hearts" (147), Jakob has a "hunger for sound [...] almost as sharp as desire" (163). He knows that those who were murdered must have "cried out" but also that "It is impossible to imagine those sounds" (168). Since what "citizens, soldiers, and the SS performed [were] unspeakable acts" (166), to capture in writing what their victims had gone through seems to be a near impossible task.

In a short essay entitled "Cleopatra's Love" Anne Michaels writes that "The inevitable failure of language haunts integrity" (178)—an assertion not only reflected in Jakob's concern that words can never fully capture the horror of war but also in the widely-accepted notion "that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language fails in the face of trauma" (Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography* 6).[32] This applies not only to written but also oral accounts of the past. Shoshana Felman points out in *The Juridical Unconscious* the seemingly hopeless task Holocaust victims had during trials held in the wake of World War II to express what they had experienced in the concentration camps. Felman writes, "A victim [...] is *robbed of a language* with which to articulate his or her victimization. What is available to him as language is only the oppressor's language" (125, emphasis original). Thus, the Eichmann trial had "the function [...] to invent and to articulate from scratch [a new language], [so that] the Jews [could] emerge precisely from the 'subhumanity' that has been linguistically impressed on them" (126). Further Felman contends that the court case became *"a legal process of translation* of thousands of private, secret traumas into one collective, public and communally acknowledged one" (124, emphasis original).

The Eichmann trial works in support of a commonly shared memory because it finds a way to give those who were silenced a voice and to ensure that their stories are not forgotten. On the issue of collective memory, Schiff, Noy and Cohler have argued that "In the voice of a person, the spirit of an era and social group can be heard" (160). In "Collected Stories in the Life Narratives of Holocaust Survivors" they identify what they call "collected stories," that is, "stories outside of direct experience" but which "are integrated in our presentation of the past, and self understanding, because they are personally relevant to us" (159). They believe these stories are narrated as if they were the subject's own not only because they help

[32] Méira Cook has argued that "Michaels's project [...] might be perceived as an attempt to metaphorize history, memory, and narrative precisely in order to challenge the literal, to articulate catastrophe in language that is poetic and densely allusive" (16). She adds, however, that her style of writing is at odds with the devastating events that are unfolding on the page, and that this induces unease: "Michaels's lush, poetic discourse jars uneasily with the horrors she is narrating and so contributes to our discomfort as readers" (16).

constitute the collective past but also because they "are personally salient and [...] important enough to be told as a part of personal history" (160), and "sometimes [...] central to one's understanding of the past" (161).[33]

The idea of helping to write the collective memory of a people while at the same time trying to understand one's immediate past is epitomised in *Fugitive Pieces* by having Jakob's memoirs comprise his own as well as collected stories of those Jews who were tortured and killed in the war. In this way, writing allows him not only to make sense of the traumatic events of his own life but also to capture the collective history of his people. In the end, then, the feat Jakob achieves is that his memoirs create a platform where silenced voices are restored and once-forgotten stories heard. Realising full well—along with the implied author and reader—that language can never quite express the trauma of war, his journals are nevertheless an attempt "to honour every inch of flesh in words" (163), "to set down the past in the cramped space of a prayer" (191).

"*Ghetto diaries*"[34]

Fugitive Pieces suggests that silenced voices might be reinstated and discarded life stories posthumously heard through the act of writing. However, the text does not merely suggest but also *exhorts* the living to recall and even recreate the lives of those who passed away.[35] Seeing that it executes this type of rescue action itself, it moreover performs the way writing can reinstate the mute and the dead. A good starting point for this is Jakob's strong sense of obligation to the past, together with the idea that "The event is meaningful only if the coordination of time and place is witnessed" (162). Jakob believes that writing about what happened can give substance to the lives of those who passed away; he declares, "There's no absence, if there remains even the memory of absence. Memory dies unless it's given a use" (193). While history cannot be stopped or changed, Jakob feels that by remembering the events of the past we are doing as our scruples demand:

> History is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral; what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers. History is the Totenbuch, The Book of the Dead, kept by the administrators of the camps. Memory is the Memorbucher, the names of those to be mourned, read aloud in the synagogue. (138)

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[33] John Robinson notes the important role autobiographical memory has played in the fields of history and biography. He writes that "From the beginning biographers and historians have used personal recollections to construe the individual and collective past" (19).

[34] Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* 40

[35] In "The Holocaust and the Trajectory of the Twentieth Century," Moishe Postone invokes Michael Marrus's idea that "Historians who deal with the Holocaust [...] are confronted by two separable tasks. One is to tell the story, to commemorate—as an obligation to the dead and as a warning to future generations. The other is 'to integrate the history of the Holocaust into the general stream of historical consciousness'" (81).

Encouraged in his thinking by Athos,[36] Jakob believes it is the responsibility of the living to honour the dead by remembering them. At the same time he realises the enormity of this task and asks, "How can one man take on the memories of even one other man, let alone five or ten or a thousand or ten thousand; how can they be sanctified each?" (52). To help us reconstruct the lives of those who have passed away he suggests we turn to nature, which he believes contains traces of personal memory. By scrutinising the earth and the air around us, the lives of those who died in the war can be reimagined. Indeed, "Though they were taken blind, though their senses were confused by stench and prayer and screams, by terror and memories, these passengers found their way home. Through the rivers, through the air" (52) and, we might add, through Jakob's writing.[37]

In addition to the notion that "Human memory is encoded in air currents and river sediment" (53), the text suggests that the passing on of "family stories [and] the names of relatives" (40) might also be achieved by other, less abstract, means such as the oral tradition or the concealment and excavation of memorabilia. In a seminal passage the narrator describes how during the war Jews would inter their heirlooms to save them from being confiscated and demolished by the Nazis:

> In the zudeccha, the Spanish sliver siddur with hinges in the spine, the tallith and candlesticks are being buried in the earth under the kitchen floor. Letters to absent children, photos, are buried. While the men and women who place these valuables in the ground have never done so before, they go through the motions with centuries of practice guiding their hands, a ritual as familiar as the Sabbath. […]. All across Europe there's such buried treasure. A scrap of lace, a bowl. *Ghetto diaries that have never been found.* (39-40, my emphasis)

This passage intimates (in keeping with contemporary life writing theory)[38] that a person's life narrative need not take on the conventional form but may be contained in letters, pictures and other personal effects. Significantly, these "Ghetto diaries" (40) are invoked on the very first page of the novel, where we are informed that while some were found, others went missing:

> During the Second World War, countless manuscripts—diaries, memoirs, eyewitness accounts—were lost or destroyed. Some of these narratives were deliberately hidden—buried in back gardens, tucked into walls and under floors—by those who did not live to retrieve them.
> Other stories are concealed in memory, neither written nor spoken. Still others are recovered, by circumstance alone. (2)

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[36] The ways in which Athos urges Jakob to commemorate the dead include organising a special service "For [Jakob's] parents, for the Jews of Crete, for all who have no one to recall their names" (75). He further instructs Jakob to "Do good on their behalf" for "good deeds help the moral progress of the dead" (75). Presciently, Athos tells Jakob, "Write to save yourself […] and someday you'll write because you've *been* saved" (165, my emphasis).

[37] In an interview with Branko Gorjup, Anne Michaels reveals that "There is also, in [*Fugitive Pieces*] a strong sense of the physical world possessing memory. Whether on the level of molecules or atoms, physical matter remembers. […]. Somehow, on a quantum level, experience is captured, whether in DNA, in rock strata or in human memory "(2).

[38] Smith and Watson see "life narrative" as referring to autobiography of any type, "whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital" (4).

It is, then, through analysing traces in physical matter as well as salvaging personal documents that Jakob suggests recollecting the lives of those who perished in the war. Though he realises it is impossible to "take on the memories of even one other man" (52), this does not stop him from writing about the dead or from trying to "honour every inch of flesh in words" (163). Clearly, this kind of attempt at recalling the memories of the dead can never be completely factual but must of necessity involve elements of fabrication. While some might outright reject such a rendition of history on the basis that it is not completely correct, others have made a case for the validity of using one's imagination to recreate past events. As Schiff, Noy and Cohler point out, Geoffrey Hartman believes that just because a depiction of the past might not be entirely accurate, this does not mean that it is truth-less. Accordingly, the truth of a narrative lies not so much in its factuality as in the ability "to keep the emotional experience of Holocaust survivors before our eyes as an object of consideration" (163). In related vein Janet Gunn has posited, with particular regard to life writing, that "autobiography can never exhume all of that buried life making up the past. But just because all of the past cannot be *present*ed does not mean that it is therefore absent from the autobiographical text" (14, emphasis original). What Jakob's memoirs bring to the fore is that even though "all of the past" (Gunn 14) can never be known it can still be remembered by dint of the written word. Succinctly put, in writing about war victims and invoking their memories, the effect of verisimilitude can be created, thereby reinstating the dead and giving the past presence.

Bog people

Because Jakob's journals call to mind the dead and "keep [...] before our eyes" (Gunn 163) the happenings of the past, they execute an act of disinterment, not unlike Athos's archaeological work. Both masters at digging up forgotten lives, it is in particular the trope of the bog people which allows for a compelling analogy—Athos's interest in the exhumation of men and women sacrificed in peat moors is comparable to Jakob's urge to dig up and recall the memories of those killed in the war. Using his memoirs as a platform to give a voice to the Jews silenced during the Holocaust, he makes certain that their collective life story is preserved for posterity.[39] To bring this in relation to the initial analogy between archaeology and writing, one might venture that by committing their story to paper, war victims and their life narratives are conserved indefinitely, much like bog bodies who "Asleep for centuries [...] are uncovered perfectly intact; thus they outlast their killers—whose bodies have long dissolved to dust" (49).

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[39] Marianne Hirsch notes in "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile" that the custom of remembering Jewish societies that disappeared can be traced back to the start of the previous century: "During the first wave of refugee emigrations from Eastern Europe to the West, following the pogroms in the early part of [the twentieth] century, a Jewish memorial tradition developed among diasporic communities, based on ancient and medieval practices of commemoration that could serve as a resource and a model to children of survivors. The *yizker bikher*, or memorial books, prepared in exile by survivors of the pogroms, were meant to preserve the memory of their destroyed cultures" (423).

Significantly, Jakob's character literally embodies the figure of the bog person. Coming out of his hiding place the day that Athos finds him, Jakob describes himself as a "Bog-boy [who] surfaced into the miry streets of the drowned city" (5); further he says that "[he] squirmed from the marshy ground like Tollund Man, Grauballe Man, like the boy they uprooted in the middle of Franz Josef street while they were repairing the road" (5).[40] Exiting the swamp, "Dripping with prune-coloured juices of the peat-sweating bog. Afterbirth of earth" (5), Jakob is reborn, pulled by Athos—in the role of surrogate parent—"From out of his trousers" (14). Of his rescue Jakob says, "No one is born just once. If you're lucky, you'll emerge again in someone's arms" (5), making it plain to see how his own good fortune at being given a new life is related to his determination to excavate the memories of those killed in the war.

What needs to be stressed is that by reinstating the dead Jakob is undermining the actions of those who drove them to their graves. Put differently, by giving a voice to Holocaust victims Jakob is contesting their silencing and launching a counter-attack on their killers. Karin Sanders has written on the idea of using bog people to defy a given rule or regime—and specifically National Socialist thinking—in *Bodies in the Bog and the Archaeological Imagination*. In a section devoted to how mummified bodies have been instrumental in reaching political ends, Sanders remarks that they feature in a talk Heinrich Himmler gave in 1937 (61-65). According to Sanders "Himmler implied [that] the bodies represented someone *entartet*, degenerate" (62). Further she points out that "[bog bodies] in the Nazi archaeological scheme [...] represent those who were to be destroyed: the homosexual, the gypsy, the Jew" (62). Sanders then goes on to argue that in *Fugitive Pieces* Anne Michaels inverts and challenges the way the Nazis used the image of the bog body. Instead of denoting ostracization, Michaels uses it to represent recalcitrance and strength (69-76). Sanders writes, "[Michaels] usurps the archaeological iconography Himmler had exploited and shows how the bodies can be about not forgetting the crime against humanity committed during the Holocaust" (70). To this she adds that the inclusion of the Moorsoldaten-song,[41] which the Borgermoor inmates wrote in opposition to Nazi tyranny: "Censured and unable to sing about their fate, the concentration camp prisoners use the bog as a 'figure of' resistance" (72).

Analogous to his own rescue, Jakob, then, sets out to salvage the ghetto diaries (and with that the memories) of those Jews who died in the war, thereby striking back at National Socialism's *Judenpolitik*. The idea that it is an *obligation* to do so is continued—along with the trope of bog people—in Part II, where Ben has taken over as narrator. When he is a child and reads about bog bodies for the first time, Ben feels consoled by the fact that they have been maintained. As an adult he is able to explain why:

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[40] A further analogy between Jakob and the bog people is that both parties are exilic, albeit in a different way. While Jakob is subjected, among others, to geographic, familial and linguistic displacement, the bog people are in limbo somewhere between life and death. Indeed, they are not only are exiled from the living but, by virtue of their mummified status, also from the dead.

[41] It is through Naomi's character that we are introduced to the Moorsoldaten-song in the text. She tells us, "The Nazis didn't allow prisoners to sing anything except Nazi marching songs while they cut the peat, so it was real rebellion to invent a song of their own" (240).

> I see now that my fascination wasn't archaeology or even forensics: it was biography. The faces that stared at me across the centuries [...] were the faces of people without names. They stared and waited, mute. *It was my responsibility to imagine who they might be.* (221, my emphasis)

As was Jakob, Ben is clearly dictated by his conscience to conjure up the lives of the dead. That they share a sense of moral obligation becomes even more evident when Ben recounts how, after the war had ended, mass graves were opened up and corpses excavated. It is particularly his account of one such a site near Warsaw which reveals the moral imperative both he and Jakob are living under. To emphasise how Russian internees and Jewish survivors doing the excavation work would disinter far more than just decaying cadavers, Ben quotes from one of Jakob's books and writes, "*They put their bare hands not only into death [...] but into emotions, beliefs, confessions. One man's memories then another's, thousands whose lives it was their duty to imagine*" (279, emphasis original). Further, though he admits that "The hindsight of biography is [...] elusive and deductive," that it is "Guesswork, a hunch" (222), Ben believes "Even the most reticent subject can be—at least in part—posthumously constructed" (222).

Ben certainly fulfils his self-assigned task for in the diegetic world of the narrative he is ultimately responsible for bringing to light the life stories of a number of people. First, it is he who goes to Idhra where, with a stroke of luck, he recovers Jakob's journal. Following his find, he has Jakob's memoirs published and by this intervention succeeds in giving a voice not only to Jakob but also to those who feature in his writing, i.e. those who were killed and silenced in the war. Additionally he sets Jakob's life story within the framework narrative of his own life. By thus extending Jakob's memoirs with his own, Ben not only makes known his parents' story of escape and survival but also conveys the insidious ways in which war and exile are imparted to future generations.

Fugitive Pieces, to borrow Jakob's term, is an instance of "Russian dolls" (14): the memories and stories of Jews persecuted and killed in the war are embedded in Jakob's memoirs, which in turn are framed by Ben's account of his own life—and Ben's narrative, of course, is contained within the text written by Anne Michaels. In this way, Michaels's writing performs the very task it assigns her protagonists. Put differently, because it reinstates forgotten life narratives, *Fugitive Pieces* becomes—by proxy—the memoirs of those killed in the war, of those whose ghetto diaries were never found.[42]

If Michaels and her protagonists mirror one another's actions, the question arises if they also share other similarities. This requires a closer look at Michaels's personal life, though such an undertaking will no doubt be a source of vexation to the author, who has declined to

[42] According to Susan Gubar, bringing back the deceased is a motif commonly found in works produced after the Holocaust. Gubar claims that, in *Fugitive Pieces*, "Jacob (with the dead Athos) and Ben (with the dead Jacob) typify the attempts of many creative writers, visual artists, and scholars to witness the witnesses in a manner that displays how post-Holocaust proxy-witnessing will attempt to keep memory of the Shoah alive during a period (soon to come) when there will be no survivors alive to attest for themselves" (271).

divulge any personal information that might be brought in connection with her work.[43] Though not much is known about her private life, in the "Introduction" to the Bloomsbury edition of *Fugitive Pieces* John Berger notes that Anne Michaels's Polish ancestors settled in Canada in the thirties, and that her cultural heritage played an important role in her life: "Some of the family stories she heard as a child," writes Berger, "came from the eastern side of the Dnieper" (par. 2). A few obvious parallels can be drawn between her own life and that of her characters: like Jakob, Michaels is a poet, and like Ben she grew up in Canada, the child of a Polish émigré father. As to whether she is Jewish, Michaels has resolutely withheld any clear answer, this because she feels it would lead people to believe that writing about the war and the Holocaust was important to her only because such an undertaking was vested with personal interest (Crown par.4). Instead she insists that "We should all be interested, no matter where we come from, or who our parents are. […]. These questions concern us all" (Crown par. 3).

On the matter of showing interest in the past, Annick Hillger argues that references to time in *Fugitive Pieces* evokes the idea of *Jetztzeit* as used by Walter Benjamin:

> Like his friend […] Ernst Bloch, Benjamin writes within a specifically Jewish tradition of remembrance. Like Bloch, he revises the marxist dialectical conception of history by departing from a linear, continuous concept of time and introducing a notion of the present […] Bloch insists that the present contains moments of *utopia*, and if it is blind to these moments it turns into a past containing our present as already lost. Hence the need to look backward […]. In a similar fashion, Benjamin urges us to 'fan … the spark of hope in the past' ("Theses" 257). He assigns this task to the historian who should be compelled by a responsibility to the dead […] Benjamin envisages the historian as someone who finds traces of hope in the past in order to achieve a redemption of the present. (29)

Hillger then goes on to argue that similar to Benjamin, Michaels believes we have a duty to those who are deceased. Accordingly, her "ethics consists in telling and retelling the story of those who can no longer speak for themselves, for the past and the present are part of an ongoing communal story" (30). The notion that remembering is an obligation is corroborated by what Michaels herself reveals in a section of the Reading Guide to the Bloomsbury edition entitled "Anne Michaels' Favourite Books." As concerns contemporary novels, Michaels singles out *Austerlitz* as it "holds the reader in its spell with every word" (par. 7). Further she writes that "in Sebald's books history is a visceral sensation—random yet inexorable, flowing both backwards and forwards in time and space […]. For Sebald, memory is a deeply moral act and I find this particularly moving" (par. 7).

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[43] In an interview with Sarah Crown from *The Guardian*, Michaels motivates her decision not to divulge any personal details: "'I really believe we read differently when we know even the most banal facts of an author's life'" (Crown par. 2).

Recalling past lives takes centre stage in *Fugitive Pieces*.[44] Whether this entails deciphering traces left in the natural world, retrieving buried artefacts or imaginatively reconstructing memories, the point is that the dead constantly need to be "[kept] before our eyes" (Gunn 163). The idea that this is a moral obligation is expressed by the protagonists in the text and endorsed by the author herself. As I have argued, this correlation in the importance they ascribe memory, in addition to the other characteristics they share, almost invites an analogy between Michael's life and that of her main characters. Thus, though she tries to steer away from confirming or denouncing the autobiographical in her writing, it seems unavoidable that parallels will be drawn between life in the concrete world and in the text, and autobiographical inferences made.

Fictional factuality

Anne Michaels's text celebrates the importance of life writing. To start with, it intimates that through writing about the past, feelings of guilt and remorse can be expiated and traumatic events dealt with. Further it posits that memoir writing has the power to eradicate the silence enforced on war victims by acting in their stead. But because it simultaneously becomes the memoirs of Holocaust victims by proxy, *Fugitive Pieces* also enacts that which it suggests. In this way, the text manages to direct our attention to the consequences of war, not only in terms of those who were persecuted, incarcerated and/or exiled, but also those who survived the war or who followed a generation after and who were left with the charge of keeping the dead alive.

In what follows, I want to take a closer look at the way in which Michaels appropriates the autobiographical genre in order to bring across the consequences of exile and war, most notably that of dislocation and discontent. To this end I will show that the text questions the clear division between historical truth and fictionalised accounts of the past by blurring boundaries between genres as well as by conflating the real and the unreal world. Considering my claim above that written accounts can (or should) embody forgotten and discarded lives and as it were act on their behalf, it is inevitable that they will conflate fact and fiction. Put differently, since the whole point of the writing exercise is to recreate the lives of "those who had lived invisibly, who were never known" (147), keeping the real and the invented apart is not as simple as the book's classification as fictional memoir suggests.[45]

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[44] Michaels writes about the importance of memory and of remembering in her other work and especially in her second novel, *The Winter Vault*. Along with the recurring themes of exile, dispossession and the persecution of Polish Jews during World War II, memory is revered in the text for the role it plays in connecting people. At the end of the novel the narrator says, "Our memories contain more than we remember: those moments too ordinary to keep, from which, all of our lives, we drink. Of all the privileges of love, this seemed to [Avery] to be the most affecting: to witness, in another, memories so deep they remain ineffable, glimpsed only by an intuition, by an illogical preference or an innocent desire, by a sorrow that arises out of seeming nothingness, an inexplicable longing" (328-329).

[45] *Fugitive Pieces* was widely marketed as Anne Michaels's first novel. After publishing two celebrated collections of poetry (*The Weight of Oranges* and *Miner's Pond*), Michaels brought out her story of Holocaust survivors in 1996. The book won a series of fiction awards including "the Lannan Literary Fiction award, the Guardian Fiction award [...] the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel award [...] and England's prestigious Orange prize" (Brigg par. 1).

Therefore, while *Fugitive Pieces* admittedly comprises the memoirs of an imaginary character and as such might be classified as fiction, it is my contention that such categorisation gives the hybridity of the narrative short shrift.

In order to appreciate the text's generic complexity, it is instructive to look at the development of the memoir genre as well as to historicize the interrelationship between autobiography and the novel. Brian Finney reminds us of the fact that "In England autobiography was firmly established as a mode before Defoe and Richardson set out to free fiction from its bondage to the artificiality of the romance tradition" (66). Further Finney notes that fiction initially followed memoir, and that "The novel became the more popular of the two only once it had absorbed many of the features of autobiography" (67). The sixteenth-century novel did not, of course, look as it does today. As M.H. Abrahams points out, "the novel as we now think of it emerged in England in the early eighteenth century" (118). It is interesting to note that what is commonly considered "the first true 'novel of incident'" (118), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), is precisely the fictional autobiography of the title's eponymous protagonist. Fictional memoir, then, played an undeniably significant role in the history and conception of the novel, and it seems to me that during the Victorian era its pivotal place in the literary canon was consolidated as the practice of having the protagonist sketch out his or her life became popular among novelists, with especially the bildungsroman taking off.[46] With the advent of modernism, the end of the nineteenth century saw notable changes to the realist tradition of writing (fictional) memoir. As noted in the Introduction, modernist as well as postmodernist writers experimented with the conflation of fact and fiction in new and different ways—that is, less in the sense of impersonating the autobiographical form than of interrogating and self-reflexively calling attention to it. Subsequently, in the period spanning the turn of the century, writers such as Anne Michaels and Frank McCourt appear to have taken up modernist ideals of conflating autobiography and fiction in new and innovative ways,[47] and as such to have established a fashion for questioning the autobiographical pact and creating uncertainty about the truth-value of their texts.

Because *Fugitive Pieces* plays with autobiografiction in a wholly new and unconventional way, it can be said to be part of the contemporary period's experimentation with literary memoir. However, unlike *Angela's Ashes*, it does not claim to be factual and then present material in such a way that makes us suspect it might not all be true. Indeed, in declaring itself to be trans-generic, *Fugitive Pieces* does the exact opposite; that is to say, it presents

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[46] Smith and Watson write that "In the nineteenth century many novels were presented as autobiographical narratives, the life stories of fictional characters. […]. Such narratives […] are part of the development of the bildungsroman, a form that German scholar Wilhelm Dilthey defined as the story of an individual's struggle to become a social subject" (10).

[47] While the contemporary period has experienced a memoir boom, the type of experimentation and creativity referred to here is not all-encompassing. This is possibly because, as *New York Times* Magazine Editor James Atlas has posited, there seems to be a belief today that "everyone can be an artist. Everyone can be an autobiographer. Even academia has got into the act" (pars. 2-3).

someone's memoirs as fiction, and then asks whether some of it cannot also be factual. This is achieved by virtue of the intricate enmeshment of fact and fiction in the novel. To start with, the text conflates the real and the imaginary by playing with the reader's expectations through its manipulation of authenticity markers. To elucidate: to the uninformed or unsuspecting reader it might not be clear from the start that this is the diary of a make-believe person (despite the fact that it is formally classified as a novel). The story opens in the conventional vein of the bildungsroman by intimating that what is to follow is not fictional but the actual memoirs of real-life poet Jakob Beer—[48] we are informed that "Shortly before his death, Beer had begun to write his memoirs" (2). But whereas the bildungsroman uses the first-person, *Fugitive Pieces* features a third-person narrator. Thus we infer immediately that novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield* are pseudo-autobiographical since we know the authors to be Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens. In contrast, with *Fugitive Pieces* we might be misled into believing that the writer (Anne Michaels) is introducing the journals of a flesh-and-blood person who died before he was able to publish his memoirs. The illusion of reality is reinforced when Jakob himself confirms that that what we are reading is in fact his autobiography:

> Athos's family house—where I *now* sit and write *this*, these many years later—is a record of the Roussos generations. (155, my emphasis)

Investigating "narratologically grounded attempts at identifying signposts of fictionality'" (1), Martin Löschnigg argues "there are no textual features which identify homodiegetic narratives as either autobiography or fiction" (2). Instead, "all seems to depend on contextual and/or paratextual aspects" (2). He adds, however, that these may be "missing [...] ambiguous [...] or even deliberately misleading" (2). *Fugitive Pieces* is a case in point for it is only in the second part of the book that the reader surmises that it was Ben (and not Michaels) who wrote the introduction to Jakob's diaries, a finding which ostensibly classifies the text as fiction for—as we have seen Lejeune argue—the narrator, protagonist and author must share an identity in order for a work to be categorised as autobiography proper. However, since the text itself assigns the writer the task of conjuring up the lives of the deceased and of performing in lieu of diaries lost and memories interred, this statement needs to be revised—*Fugitive Pieces* may not be autobiographical in the traditional or Lejeunean sense of the word but it is not purely fictional either for it resurrects the lives of war victims and makes us (vicariously) relive the horrors of the Holocaust. Phrased differently, Jakob and Ben might not be real themselves, but their experiences and emotions certainly coincide with those of flesh-and-blood people.

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[48] On the structure of the bildungsroman, Smith and Watson note "The narrators of these texts employ the intimate first person as protagonists confiding their personal histories and attempting to understand how their past experiences formed them as social subjects" (10).

The historical novel

The conflation of fictitious characters and a real historical setting invokes, of course, the historical novel. In their comprehensive overview of the way history is portrayed in popular culture, Korte and Palatschek define the historical novel as bearing on an event which took place in a specific epoch known to the reader (21). While the genre pays some attention to historical accuracy as a means of informing the reader, it also animates events to make the reading experience pleasurable. Since the author, then, reconstructs the past even while making it palatable to the reader, the historical novel is an amalgamation of fact and fiction. As such it typically features make-believe personae who act against the backdrop of authentic past events (22). *Fugitive Pieces* clearly qualifies as an historical novel according to the above definition: it has its setting in the second world war and features fictional characters, thereby achieving a mix of the fictive and the real.

Michaels's text, by virtue of its ontology as historical novel, implicitly alludes to the impossible task of accurately depicting historical events.[49] By using one of its characters as a mouthpiece it overtly refers to the unreliability of historical narratives and to the fact that the past might be deliberately concocted. A scholar of history (and specifically of paleobotany and archaeology), Athos studies the ways in which the SS-Ahnenerbe manipulated history to suit the fascist ideals of the National Socialist Party, and writes about it in a book called *Bearing False Witness*. One example he offers is the way Himmler would bribe scientists to come up with "proof that 'Hottentots' had been conquered by ancient Aryans […] that Greek civilization started in … neolithic Germany" (104). This cannot but make one wonder how Himmler could go on believing in the superiority of his race since he had actually *paid money* to have the past amended. In order to grasp how this is possible, the narrator posits that "There's a precise moment when we reject contradiction. This moment of choice is the lie we will live by. What is dearest to us is often dearer to us than truth" (166). This psychoanalytic interpretation of human behaviour explains how the Nazis could manipulate history to support their beliefs without ever acknowledging the irony of their actions.[50]

The destruction of the Iron Age town of Biskupin attests to the Reich's self-deceiving quest to come up trumps in history:

> […] Biskupin was proof of an advanced culture that wasn't German; Himmler ordered its obliteration. It wasn't enough to win the future. The job of Himmler's SS-Ahnenerbe—the Bureau of Ancestral Inheritance—was to conquer history. The policy of territorial expansion—lebensraum—devoured time as well as space. (104)

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[49] Writing on Hollywood war cinema, Elisabeth Bronfen argues in *Specters of War* that while war can never be faithfully portrayed, "the images and narratives that the motion picture industry provides reconceive the past according to the cultural needs of the present […] by drawing attention to the way war experiences have found their most effective afterlife in dramatic spectacles that can only ever be approximations of actual events" (2).

[50] Our ability to accommodate binaries is expounded by Freud in "The Unconscious" (1915). Freud writes, "The nucleus of the *Ucs*. consists of […] wishful impulses. These instinctual impulses are co-ordinate with one another, exist side by side without being influenced by one another, and are exempt from mutual contradiction. When two wishful impulses whose aims must appear to us incompatible become simultaneously active, the two impulses do not diminish each other or cancel each other out, but combine to form an intermediate aim, a compromise" (186).

In addition to alluding to the deliberate fabrication of history, the passage above suggests that the past comprises "time as well as space" (104), a motif which runs through the text and which is used to further comment on the unreliable nature of the history narrative. To elucidate the alliance of the temporal and the spatial, the Catalan Atlas is used as a trope. While the map "included the latest information brought back by Arabic and European travellers" (136) it also "left unknown parts of the earth blank [...] labelled [them] simply and frighteningly Terra Incognita" (136-137). This spatial map is subsequently compared to "Maps of history" (127), which are said to "have always been less honest" (137). Further it is suggested that "The closest we come to knowing the location of what's unknown is when it melts through the map like a watermark, a stain" (137) and that "On the map of history, perhaps the water stain is memory" (137). What this analogy is intimating is that the past can never be known exactly since there is much that did happen but that does not feature explicitly on the historical map. This means that memory is possibly the only indication we will ever have of that which was not formally set down on paper. Seen this way, though "History and memory share events; that is [...] time and space" (138), the fundamental difference is that "History is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral" (138). This not only reinforces the notion that any factual account of history is questionable but brings us back to the idea that it is the writer's charge to exhume the memories of those permanently silenced and to fill in the blank spaces on the historical chart.

In summary it can be said that history writing is anything but reliable; not only is the narration of the past inevitably fraught with meaning but events might also be manipulated to gratify political ideals and personal preferences. Thus, like any narrative claiming to portray authentic past events, the historical novel will ineluctably entail the enmeshment of fact and fiction, not only because make-believe characters and a real historical setting interact but because the rendering of that history itself is problematic. *Fugitive Pieces* might be categorised as fiction, but considering how it plays with its generic status as well as the ways in which it combines the real and the imaginary, such classification seems to diminish the complexity of the text.[51] Indeed, any attempt to assign it a single generic slot would disregard the fact that autobiography is a genre in exile and thus overlook two very important points. First, as a fictional memoir the text questions its own fictitiousness for *Fugitive Pieces* thematises (f)actual diaries lost during the war and acts or performs in their stead. A requiem to memories annihilated, it conjures up the lives of those who died in the Holocaust by presenting us with the life stories of its protagonists, thereby of necessity conjoining fiction with nonfiction. Second, in its capacity as an historical novel, it questions the accurate rendition of the past and focuses us in on those stories that were never recorded. As such it casts into doubt the validity of factual or true accounts of history, and effectively blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality.

[51] Donna Coffey argues that Michaels's text "[blends] poetic language into the already blurred boundaries of memoir and fiction. Its lyric voice and engagement with the pastoral mark a divergence from earlier literature of the Holocaust" (31).

Narrative uncertainty

The generic ambiguity in/of the text is exacerbated by the skilful use of narrative technique. By giving the text a fragmented structure and providing it with a polyphony of voices, as well as by moving backwards and forwards in time, Michaels achieves uncertainty. Considering her experimentation with both form and structure, it is the synthesis of generic ambiguity and narrative precariousness which makes the protagonists' unease palpable and underscores themes of exile and displacement. To start with the first of the three aforementioned narrative elements, the text is divided into two parts, each with its own I-narrator. Thus, while in *Angela's Ashes* we saw two narrators referring to the same flesh-and-blood character (a younger and an older version of Frank), in *Fugitive Pieces* the characters relating their story, Jakob and Ben, are clearly distinct. Having two narrators allows Michaels to do a number of things; however, because of this thesis's focus on exile and unease, it is the way the textual configuration unsettles the reader that I would like to single out. The most obvious reason why having a shift in narration and narrator is disconcerting is that it means taking leave of a character the reader has identified and empathised with and developing sympathies for the next. But that is not all, for apart from getting used to a new narrator we also have to get into a new narrative and figure out how it relates to the previous one, i.e. determine what connection, if any, there might be between the protagonists.

In making this transition from one story to the next and in trying to establish the connections between them we are, admittedly, given some assistance. First, the nature of the relationship between the narrators is divulged only a few pages into the second part—in Ben's story, we quickly learn that he greatly admires Jakob's work and that they meet through Maurice Salman. Additional structural continuity between the narratives appears to be established by having the second part feature ostensibly identical chapter titles to the first. They are only ostensibly identical as there are a number of disparities: the two parts neither have the same number of chapters, nor are they identically sequenced. Part I has seven sections, Part II only four; and whereas the chapter titles in Part II ("The Drowned City," "Vertical Time," "Phosphorous," "The Way Station") echo those of Part I, the sequencing does not, with "Phosphorous" and "The Way Station" swopping places. Also, while the two chapters entitled "Phosphorous" cover similar issues—lust, memory and history—"The Way Station" chapters have only little in common. In Part I its meaning as a stop between principal places en route is underscored by its positioning (it is placed exactly in the middle of the seven chapters) and by its content (it covers Jakob's arrival in Canada). In Part II, however, "The Way Station" is reserved for the very last chapter, and instead of focussing on Greece as an interim stop, it traces Ben's thoughts as he makes his way back to Canada. All of this is not to suggest that the structures of the two parts are impossibly disparate or exceedingly perplexing. What *is* being suggested is that the shift in narrators is not smoothed over as much as initially assumed if one considers the somewhat out-of-key sequencing of events or the slight variation in theme.

Despite some structural coherence, then, the transition from one narrator to the other is unsettling. Other narratorial elements that are employed to the effect of perturbing the reader includes the polyphony of voices and signs of transgenerational haunting found in the text. In the previous chapter I looked at how Frank McCourt makes use of different narrators and characters not only to comment on the inadequacies of his own childhood and upbringing but also to give the powerless and the poor in general the opportunity to raise their voice. My point was that this interplay of voice and focalisation is commonly associated with fiction writing rather than autobiography, and that McCourt thereby blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. *Fugitive Pieces* features a web of voices not less intricate than *Angela's Ashes,* but the reason that this is of significance cannot be the same for both texts, since *Fugitive Pieces*, in its capacity as an historical novel and a fictional memoir, is *expected* to feature narrative techniques associated with novelistic writing. Rather, the reason that its moving between voices is of import is that it contributes to the complexity and overall multi-planarity of the narrative.

In order to understand how displaying a polyphony of voices can contribute to the fragmented and multi-layered nature of a text, a quick reminder of Mikhail Bakhtin's work on heteroglossia and dialogism is instructive. Michael Holquist provides a good overview of Bakhtin's theories in *Dialogism*. According to Holquist, "The mutuality of differences makes dialogue Bakhtin's master concept, for it is present in exchanges at all levels—between words in language, people in society, organisms in ecosystems, and even between processes in the natural world" (41). In any sort of reciprocal exchange there is never just one meaning; this can be seen in the way the words in a novel act on each other:

> Words in literary texts are active elements in a dialogic exchange taking place on several levels at the same time [...] At the highest level of abstraction, this dialogue is between the two tendencies that energize language's power to mean [...] At another level, it is between language at the level of code [...] and language at the level of discourse [...] At still another level, simultaneity is a dialogue between the different meanings the same word has at different stages in the history of a given national language, and in various situations within the same historical period. And, of course, simultaneity is found in the dialogue between an author, his characters, and his audience, as well as in the dialogue of readers with the characters and their author. (69)

The co-occurrence of these dialogues exemplifies the number of discourses that envelop the individual. Holquist writes that according to Bakhtin, when we want to reply to something that was said, "[our response] must be framed in a specific discourse selected from the teeming thousands available" (69). One can see these effects of heteroglossia at work in *Fugitive Pieces,* a text in which there are so many discourses that have to be navigated through that the narrative becomes complex in its multi-perspectivism. Put differently, because readers are asked to react to a number of voices and viewpoints in the course of the narrative, they feel disconcerted. The interaction between the words in the text (as suggested in the passage quoted above) is thus compounded by the polyphony of voices

found in the narrative, which in turn adds to the novel's overall fragmentation and uncertainty.

Of the different voices we are presented with, the two narrators first jump to mind. While they have much in common—their national heritage, their exilic status, their love of writing and their determination to remember the dead—each also has his own distinct voice, and his own story to tell. Thus, while Jakob is brutally severed from his family when they are killed in the war, Ben is estranged from his parents while they are still alive; while Jakob's experience of social and linguistic exile is closely tied up with geographic dislocation, Ben is socially excluded by the very culture he grows up in; while Jakob is rescued by his love for Michaela, it is writing that ultimately delivers Ben. Having two different protagonists relate their life narratives allows Michaels to give a voice to first and second generation Holocaust survivor alike. What is more, by subjecting both narrators to transgenerational haunting and making them concerned with exhuming the memories of the dead, she gives a voice to Jews persecuted during the second world war. As previously intimated, what we have here is a case of the writer reporting the thoughts of her protagonists while they in turn remember and represent those killed in the war. Thus furnishing her narrative with what Robert Pippin has dubbed (in discussing Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*) a "set of perspectival boxes" (117), Michaels enables those whose voices were stifled to be heard. In this way *Fugitive Pieces* becomes a work which gives a platform to the collective voice of a people violently silenced. Ideas and memories thought lost or forgotten are thereby rekindled, and as they resurface in the text the ensuing clamour becomes impossible to ignore.

Bits and pieces

In this section, I would like to take a more in-depth look at the temporal structure of Michaels's text and at how this works together with its multi-vocality and fragmentation to bring across displacement. The organisation of the narrative is such that story-time and text-time all but coincide, which means that we as readers have to put in some work to infer the linear succession of events. The story starts off with a proleptic look at Jakob's life but it is much later before we are actually able to emplace the events referred to at the beginning. In fact, we only realise two-third of the way through the book that what is depicted on the opening page (Jakob and Michaela's death) chronologically follows Part I, and only somewhere through Part II does it become apparent that the introduction to the memoirs was (presumably) written by Ben.[52] Following the epigraph and the terse synopsis of Jakob's life and death on the first page, the story is rewound to his escape and rescue at the age of seven. Bit by bit, as we are analeptically informed of his life before the Nazi invasion and of what happened to him after he was found by Athos, we see his narrative unfold. As the story

[52] Though all evidence points toward the fact that it was Ben who wrote the introduction, it still needs to be *inferred* by the reader. Another (though perhaps less likely) argument is that it was an omniscient narrator and not Ben who was responsible for the opening paragraphs.

moves along it depicts the most significant episodes in his life, while all the time jumping backward and forward in time.

Examples abound but Athos and Jakob's visit to Daphne and Kostas in Athens offers an especially effective illustration of the way in which Michaels intersperses the present with the past. By recalling the visit in his journals, Jakob's present life in the text—i.e. "now, half a century later, writing this [memoir] on a different Greek island" (18)—is contrasted with his past. Further, within that frame, an even earlier time is invoked by having Kostas and Daphne relate the German occupation of Greece, their direct speech indicated in the text by quotation marks. *Their* narration, in turn, triggers Jakob's memory of an anterior past—he remembers the soldiers killing his parents and his subsequent concealment; he thinks of his mother and father and reminisces about the plans he and his friend Mones had for their future. These thoughts about a time preceding his rescue are indicated in the text by ellipses to set them off against the parts narrated by Kostas and Daphne (in quotation marks) and the time of the visit as such (not indicated by any special form of punctuation):

> Kostas shook his head.
> "It's as Theotokas says: 'Time was cut by a knife.' The tanks came down Vasilissis Sofias. Even when one German walks through a Greek street it's like an iron rod so cold it burns your hand. It wasn't even noon. We heard it on the radio. All morning the black cars made a trail through the city like a line of gunpowder."
> "We closed the drapes to the sun and Kostas and I sat at the table in the dark. We heard sirens, anti-aircraft guns, yet the church bells kept ringing for early Mass."
> … When they pushed my father, he was still sitting in his chair, I could tell afterwards, by the way he fell.
> "Our neighbour Aleko came to the back door to tell Kostas and me that someone saw swastikas hanging from balconies on Amalias. They flew, he said, over the palace, over the chapel on Lykavettos. It wasn't until evening, when we saw the flags ourselves, and the flag over the Acropolis, that we wept."
> … I could tell by the way he fell. (63)

The interplay of past and present, analepsis and prolepsis is continued throughout Part I until Jakob's narration is drawn to an end by his death. Instead of being stated explicitly it is the announcement of Part II which indicates a shift in the narrative and which makes the reader infer the demise of Beer. In the second part we become acquainted with Ben who has taken over the narration from Jakob. Once more, the events are told in haphazard order so that we are kept guessing where Ben fits in and of what significance his story is. As exemplified in the following passage, the narrative leaps back and forth between Ben's past and his present, and even includes bits of Jakob's story:

> You died not long after my father and I can't say which death made me reach again for your words. On Naomi's desk was your last book, *What Have You Done to Time*, and on mine was *Groundwork*.
> One evening […] Naomi suggested that I help Maurice Salman, and offer to retrieve your notebooks from Idhra […]. It was Naomi's idea: a separation.
> […].
> Naomi pressed her palms into the kitchen table and stood up. The imprint of the chair was on the back of her thighs. This made me so sad I had to close my eyes.
> […].

> At that moment, fear should have stung me, I should have smelled the whiff of ether, felt the knife edge. But I didn't. Instead I squandered our life together and only said: "I'll write to you…." (255)

As Ben's narrative—and, with that, Anne Michaels's text—draws to an end, all open questions are answered and any curiosity we might still have (either concerning the protagonists or the publication of the memoirs) satisfied. Though we have been co-producing the text all along, it is only right at the end then that all the different bits and pieces of information fall into place and that we are able to fully construct the text's story-time. Gordon Bölling has intimated that *Fugitive Pieces* manages to involve the reader: because of its poetic use of language, but also because it features a fragmented structure and different viewpoints, the text exacts greater attention from the reader who is required to establish connections between the two storylines (197). The way I see it, however, is that it is by virtue of *unsettling* the reader that he or she is affectively involved in the text. Put another way, presenting us with a writerly text which requires careful attention in order to connect the dots between the threads in the different stories induces feelings of displacement. This sense of malaise, as I will presently illustrate, is enhanced by means of generic homelessness and textual ambiguity so that in the end what the reader experiences is akin to the exilic feelings the protagonists themselves are subjected to.

A malaise shared

In *Fugitive Pieces*, form and content mutually reflect and support one another. Because Ben and Jakob's story is designed in such a way that it produces uncertainty—both in terms of narrative structure and generic classification—it reflects their sense of dislocation and unease. Previously I argued that the text blurs the borders between fact and fabrication by playing with its own status as fictional memoir and by questioning the accuracy of historical narratives. Succinctly put, I maintained that *Fugitive Pieces* vacillates between the real and the imaginary and is therefore classifiable as neither purely fact nor fiction. In the previous chapter I argued that a text of such dubious status can leave its readers feeling uneasy or unsettled. More specifically, I suggested that in *Angela's Ashes* the oscillation between fact and fiction makes the text ambiguous and hence difficult to categorise. Because readers were expecting to be given an accurate account of Frank McCourt's life, this enmeshment of fiction and nonfiction (and the ensuing inability to categorically emplace the text) led to confusion, bewilderment and occasionally downright condemnation.

Anne Michaels's text cannot, of course, be viewed in exactly the same light as *Angela's Ashes* since in McCourt's memoirs the writer and narrator-protagonist share a name. In contrast, the identities of the author and the narrator(s) are dissimilar in *Fugitive Pieces*, which is why we assume Jakob and Ben's memoirs to be pseudo-autobiographical. Also, though there is some interest in trying to gauge how much the book's content applies to Michaels's own life, we do not expect it to be true for her, and certainly do not feel deceived

by the fact that her life is not identical to that of her main characters'. Rather, what *does* make us feel disconcerted and ill at ease when reading her work is the fact that we do not only have a historical novel which casts doubt on the accuracy of narratives about the past, but also a fictional memoir which blurs the lines between fact and fiction by virtue of its claim to stand in for life narratives mislaid in the war. Undermining its own status as historical novel and fictional memoir, and intimating that the distinction between the factual and the fictitious is not always as clear as might be supposed, *Fugitive Pieces* leaves us wavering somewhere between the real and the imaginary world.

Roland Barthes was quoted before in order to point out the human need to categorise and emplace, and the unease that results if this is not possible. A recurring theme in his work, this issue is not only addressed in *Roland Barthes* but also in *S/Z*. Using the symbolic code to interpret the role of the castrato in Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes postulates that "the monster is outside nature, outside any classification, any meaning" (201). That is to say, because those La Zambinella comes into contact with feel confused and perturbed by the fact that (s)he cannot be emplaced, they see him/her as unnatural and grotesque:

> The loss of desire puts the castrato beyond life or death, *outside all classification*: how to kill what is not classified? How to reach what transgresses, not the internal order of the sexual paradigm [...] but the very existence of difference which generates life and meaning; the ultimate horror is not death but that the classification of death and life should be broken off. (197, emphasis original)

Not being classifiable by virtue of eliminating difference, says Barthes, is "the ultimate horror" (197). Translated into our terms, it is the reader's inability to categorically emplace a text which, consciously or not, is the biggest abomination. This explains why not being able to assign the narrative a fixed place in the generic framework makes readers feel lost, anxious or unsettled, and why the blurring of borders between fact and fiction in *Fugitive Pieces* creates a malaise among its readership.[53]

To move on to my second claim, the uncertainty surrounding the nature of Michaels's text is further compounded by the way in which it is structured. More specifically, it is what Donna Coffey calls "the fragmentation present in the novel's lyrical, digressive and dialogic structure" (29) which underscores its generic ambiguity. The upshot, in other words, of skilfully employing narrative elements to vacillate between narrators and voices, and to present the reader with a fragmented timeline, is the loss of orientation in the world of the narrative. We now not only ask *What is real and what is imagined?* but also *Who is speaking? Which part goes where? When did this incident take place?* One of the theorists who has talked about disjointed narrative structures in recent Holocaust writing is Froma Zeitlin. In her essay "New Soundings in Holocaust Literature," Zeitlin discusses *Fugitive Pieces* alongside Wilkomirski's *Fragments* and Schlink's *The Reader*, all of which she claims

[53] At the same time, of course, the unclassifiable nature of Michaels's text mirrors the fact that the Holocaust itself cannot be categorised. Thus form and content once again reflect (on) each other.

"have captured public interest as striking efforts to reengage in provocative ways the emotional and cognitive issues that inhabit the inner landscapes of haunted memory, reflecting the pervasive grip that that the traumatic past continues to hold upon present lives and identities—for their characters, and, by extension, for us" (176). In these historical novels, fragmented story lines are put to effective use:

> [...] as we discover sooner or later in these nonlinear narratives, the events of the past, recollected from the perspective of time over a long duration, have in no way lessened their grip on the present. Quite the contrary. The past incessantly resurfaces into consciousness in both direct and oblique ways with all the urgency of an obsession that disrupts chronology and casts a shadow over all subsequent experience. (177)

While Zeitlin believes fragmentation allows the past to reemerge in the present, Dominick LaCapra (in the same collection of essays) intimates that it is an effective way of bringing across trauma. According to LaCapra, "trauma invites distortion, disrupts genres or bounded areas, and threatens to collapse distinctions" (216). Further, an unconventional depiction of the happenings is necessary in order to show how trauma disquiets and perturbs. Therefore "there is something inappropriate about modes of representation which in their very style or manner of address tend to overly objectify, smooth over, or obliterate the nature and impact of the events they treat" (220). Instead, literary texts need to be innovative if they want to deal with trauma:

> In literature and art [...] one may observe the role of a practice that has perhaps been especially pronounced since the Shoah but may be found earlier, notably in testimonial art: experimental, gripping, and risky symbolic emulation of trauma in what might be called traumatized or posttraumatic writing [...] This markedly performative kind of writing may be risky—at least insofar as it is not automatized and assimilated in mimetic fashion as an all-purpose methodology that predictably privileges excess, incalculability, the transgression of limits, (self-)shattering, unbound or associative play, and so forth. (221-222)

In order to depict emotional distress, a "markedly performative kind of writing" (221) is required for it is only by being disturbed ourselves that trauma can be imparted to the reader. In related vein, but referring specifically to exile, Robert Edwards has posited that "literature concerned with banishment and flight contains within itself certain remedies of estrangement: it is never enough merely to record loss" (23). As suggested before, it is in and through her experimentation with fictional memoir that Anne Michaels manages to achieve the alienation and disruption suggested by theorists like Edwards, LaCapra and Zeitlin. Presenting the reader with a prevaricating, broken-up story that blurs borders she manages to transmit rather than "merely record" (Edwards 23) trauma and privation. In this way the reader is made to share in the dislocation and unease experienced by the characters in the text. In a word, generic uncertainty and narrative fragmentation combine their efforts to undergird the idea of displacement and malaise, and ultimately make us experience the alienating effects of war and exile for ourselves.

Reflection

In Anne Michaels's story of Holocaust survival, war and exile are depicted as inextricably linked and catastrophic in their effects: geographic dislocation, familial alienation, social exclusion and trauma compromise not only the lives of those who experience it first-hand but also those who have acquired it as part of their legacy. In the face of crippling war the subject is not, however, left completely powerless, for *Fugitive Pieces* suggests that the debilitating aftermath of battle can be redressed and that language has the power to heal. Writing, that is, is seen as a a way of reinstating the voices of those silenced in the war. Indeed, the text implies that it is the obligation of the writer—fictional or real—to exhume so-called "Ghetto diaries" (40) and give existence to those memories secreted and forgotten, thereby so to speak calling forth the dead from their graves.

Since such conjectured life narratives act on behalf of real, discarded ones, they will of necessity conflate fact and fiction. Thus *Fugitive Pieces,* the prototype of this type of memoir, features an interplay of the real and the invented. The fact/fantasy interface in the text is further complicated by virtue of the fact that it is an historical novel, i.e. that it combines an actual event with fictional characters. This transgression of borders and ensuing ambivalence is augmented all the more by the artful appropriation of narrative technique: jumping around in time and oscillating between narrators and different voices enhance the text's shiftiness. In the end it is the overall uncertainty brought about by this type of narrative fragmentation as well as by the generic ambiguity which creates a malaise among readers and which mirrors the protagonists' dislocation and sense of unease.

Though the book's title might be interpreted in any number of ways, in light of the discussion above I would like to single out two specific connotations. To start with, *Fugitive Pieces* might refer to the structure of the text—we have fragments of time and echoes of forgotten voices, and we have different pieces of texts by different narrators, some of it fact and some of it fiction. But the title might also refer to the pieces war victims are reduced to when they find themselves in exile. Cut off from their family, surrounded by unknown territory and confronted with a foreign language, the Holocaust émigré will inevitably feel out of place in the host country. Constantly reliving the trauma of the past and belonging to a people who have had been stripped of their humanness, thereby being literally relegated to "'figuren,' 'stücke,' 'dolls,' 'wood,' 'merchandise,' 'rags'" (165), the title asks what other choice exiles and outcasts will have *but* to feel less than whole.

In addition to the devastation that isolation and alienation wreak, *Fugitive Pieces* shows that the refugee will more often than not suffer from a guilty conscience about surviving the war. However, the text also indicates that war survivors can expiate their guilt and talk about feelings of remorse by writing about the past. That autobiography writing allows one to express compunction also comes to the fore in the next chapter. To be sure, Allon White's *Too Close to the Bone* reveals a number of similarities with both the preceding texts—it talks about guilt, about family, and about death. Yet in many ways White's text is different and

presents new challenges in the quest to analyse how writers at the turn of the twenty-first century appropriated the autobiographical genre to deal with displacement and unease. For one, *Too Close to the Bone* is not a full-length memoir but an autobiographical fragment. Second, it was written in the decade preceding the publication of *Angela's Ashes* and *Fugitive Pieces,* and thus stands at the beginning of the contemporary memoir boom. Finally, while it features a range of exiles, these are in part so well-hidden that the reader has to labour to understand what it is exactly that constitutes the subject's sense of homelessness, i.e. what it is that he is trying to hide by virtue of the autobiographical text.

Chapter 3

Too Close to the Bone: Allon White's Writerly Memoir

> And whilst I am always looking over my shoulder for praise and acclaim I shall not be able to write one honest word, not one word of truth. It is hope less. I am further away now than ever. It has gone. I can conjure … nothing.
>
> —Allon White, "Why Am I a Literary Critic?"

In the end, death would have dominion: Allon White, rising star of the academic world, passed away at the age of 37.[1] He did not die, however, without leaving behind a legacy. He wrote extensively (considering the brevity of his life) and produced critical work on, amongst others, culture, carnival, identity formation and memory. White wrote on Dickens, Deleuze, Pynchon, Kristeva, and extensively on Bakhtin and helped, according to Stuart Hall, to inaugurate "an absolutely fundamental 'turn' in cultural theory" (25).[2] A lesser known fact is that, just before he died, White wrote about the writerly nature of autobiography. This is not to suggest that *Too Close to the Bone* has not been widely read; on the contrary, it is well-known in the academic world. But, in terms of critical writing, little has been done on White's autobiographical fragment. More striking still, no mention has been made of how it treats autobiography as a *texte scriptible*; that is, about how it performs the idea that the reader needs to become actively involved if the autobiographer is to come to new insights about the self.[3] This chapter proposes to put that right.

Too Close to the Bone can be seen as belonging to the turn-of-the-century memoir boom; for one, it was written in the late eighties;[4] for another, it plays with the life writing genre. Not only is it a fragment (instead of a full-length memoir or a short life narrative) but it also deliberately conflates parts of an old novel White wrote when he was in his twenties with seemingly disparate autobiographical sketches and reflections on the present. Further to fusing different genres and time periods, the text displays a jumbled story line. The significance of the narrative, however, is not so much that it comprises a mix of fact and

[1] The idea that death will (not) have dominion is, of course, an invocation of "And death shall have no dominion" by Dylan Thomas; see *The Poems of Dylan Thomas* (55) for the poem in its entirety.

[2] White is probably best known for writing *The Uses of Obscurity* (1981) and, with Peter Stallybrass, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986).

[3] In *S/Z,* Roland Barthes posits, "Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (4); further he claims, "The writerly text is a perpetual present […] the writerly text is *ourselves writing*" (5, emphasis original).

[4] *Too Close to the Bone* was first published posthumously in 1989.

fiction or that it has a fragmented structure (these are, after all, elements that have been encountered before) as that White self-reflexively comments on *why* he has decided to write his autobiography in this way.

White tells us the motivation behind his writing is to identify the reason for his sense of isolation and loss. By writing an autobiographical text and by using it to move between then and now, and between the invented and the real, he believes he will be able to access the truth about the past and so discover the causes of his discontent. At the same time, he asserts that this type of fact-finding mission can only be successful if the reader lends assistance. But although he declares that he needs our help, White ostensibly forgets about the role we are meant to play in the discovery process, and he starts to analyse the past on his own. Nonetheless, he feels that his autobiographical experiment was successful and that it has enabled him to work out the root of his malaise, which he pins on the fact that he has repressed the guilt he feels over his sister's death for the biggest part of his life.

Coming to understand that a guilty conscience is at the heart of his discontent does not, however, seem to have the desired effect—it does not fully account for White's sense of exile and it is certainly not cathartic. This leads one to wonder whether there is something besides guilt that might explain White's unease. In order get to the core of the matter, I take an in-depth look at the different types of displacement White suffers from. As was the case in the previous two chapters, I identify social, familial and geographic dislocation as working together to constitute the subject's malaise. But I also discover a new type of homelessness, to wit the liminal state between life and death which the writer finds himself in on account of his being diagnosed with leukaemia.

While the abovementioned instances of dislocation—the environment, death and guilt—certainly contribute to White's malcontent, I argue that they are not able to fully explain the extent of his unease. Further they are not discovered (or better put, uncovered) by the reader but very clearly stipulated by the writer. This means that as a reader I have not helped him to identify possible reasons for his malaise, and hence have not effectively contributed to the autobiographical process. In order to take up my role as an *active* agent in the autobiographical contract and ascertain what (else) might account for the subject's sense of loss, I subsequently change tack. Instead of asking what White is telling us, I ask what it is that he is *not* telling us, or what it is that he might have overlooked. I try to see, in other words, what the writer cannot due to the close proximity he has to the text. And what I find once I start scrutinising the narrative is that there is an instance of alienation which White neglects to address. That is, I notice that there is a gap where, by rights, there should be a maternal figure, and conclude that the estranged relationship White has with his mother might just very well be that which is at the bottom of his despair.

Cranfield

Too Close to the Bone makes it clear that Allon White suffers geographic dislocation. Yet, unlike prior texts, there are no instances of physical exile; White never leaves England for distant shores and thus is subjected to neither a violent nor voluntary removal from his home. This does not mean, however, that he has a sense of belonging. To be sure, as Sue Gee has pointed out, "you do not need literally to have left a place in order to experience something of the exile's deep sense of loss" (11). This seems to be particularly pertinent to White's life, for although he never actually leaves home ground he experiences exile and dejection all the same—not least of all in the town where he grows up.

To say that White feels decidedly out of place in his hometown is not to overstate the matter. When we are first introduced to Cranfield, the narrator makes no bones about the "innate dislike" (35) he has for the village; he tells us, "Cranfield, the Bedfordshire village in which I was born and grew up, is an unappealing place. From very early on I knew I disliked it and wanted to get out" (34-35). In addition to being unattractive, the town is depicted as inducing illness—we are informed that White's suffering from "chronic catarrh" (35) is directly ascribable to the town's "sulphurous chimneys" (35). The notion that living in Cranfield leads to sickness and disease is further underlined when he declares, "Despite my innate dislike of Cranfield, it is, like my leukaemia, in my bones" (35). While this likening of Cranfield to leukaemia reinforces White's aversion to his hometown it also suggests that the village becomes a part of who he is and that he feels eternally bound to it. Like his illness, White believes Cranfield is in his bones and in his blood, and though he might like to, he is convinced that he will never be able to completely escape this place which makes him feel not only ill but also ill at ease.

Besides its being displeasing and insalubrious, White mentions Cranfield's unfortunate geographic location as an additional reason for disliking it so much:

> Cranfield is geographically not the South, nor the Midlands, nor East Anglia—it sits uncomfortably on a small plateau between the three areas, pulled in all directions and blandly unsure of its identity. It is not horribly ugly, which would at least give it a kind of unlovely value. It is indeterminate and forgettable, straggly and ad hoc, like so many of the towns and villages which just fail to be part of the gritty Midlands and also fail to be part of the desolate beauty of East Anglia. (35-36)

By defining it *ex negativo* as not belonging to any specific area—i.e. neither to South, East or Central England—the narrator underlines the fact that Cranfield is "indeterminate" and "straggly" (35). It cannot categorically be emplaced on the English map but, we are told, is located in a "grey and undistinguished part of the country" (36). Further, in addition to the fact that "it sits uncomfortably" and that it is "blandly unsure of its identity" (35), White feels that "There is something lopsided and one-dimensional about the village" (36). This personification of the village seems to imply that there is more at stake here than the mere geographic coordinates of an English hamlet. In light of the fact that White feels out of place

not only in Cranfield but also in any other place or space he inhabits (as will presently become apparent), it might be argued that Cranfield's discomfort with itself and its failure to belong are to be understood as a metaphor for White's own feelings of isolation. That is to say, in the excerpt above White might not (only) be speaking of the exilic location of his hometown but he might also be alluding to personal experiences of homelessness and to his own sense of not quite belonging to any of the domains he inhabits. Indeed, juxtaposing Cranfield's indefinite location with his own leads one to conclude that the reason the village is "in [his] bones" (35) is precisely because, in his mind's eye, his exilic state has fused with that of his town's.

The high and the low

At the same time that it becomes apparent that White does not fit in in his hometown, it is also quite clear that he does not feel at home in any social milieu. Of the many worlds that constitute his life, the microcosm of the garage and workshop (which forms the nucleus of the family business) is afforded most attention. As a child White whiles away many a day in the workshop. He tells us "As a boy I loved the garage" (49) and points out that the garage of his youth was of the type that was to be found in post-war England of the 1950s, and not like any of the modern ones. To be able to imagine the garage of his youth, he recommends either "[going] to Italian or American films" or "to those lonely gas stations in the Midwest of the Hollywood 'road' films" (49). His fascination with the garage, then, is that it "was like a wonderful, quiet museum" where "Everything was old" and where there were "inexplicable bits and pieces to play with" (49). While to him "It was a magical place" and a "secret store" (49), somewhere he could rummage around and find the odd mechanical part to tinker with, it was at the same time a harmonious retreat where "The pace was very, very slow" (49), the mechanics all working under their own steam so that they "rarely spoke" (49).

However, as he starts to grow up and they increasingly engage in conversation with him, a relationship starts to develop between White and the men who work in the garage. He is treated like "a kind of occasional apprentice" (52) and given certain chores to perform, such as getting pastries or finding spare parts for the workshop. This extraordinary circumstance of being allowed to boss around the owner's son is duly exploited as the men conspire to tease and play tricks on their young associate. They often, for instance, send him on a fool's errand to get fruit pies that do not exist or to find components that have been imaginatively thought up. Their "playful and teasing attitude" (52) finally serves its pedagogical purpose, for it is their uniting against him that makes the child realise he will never be a part of them:

> The mechanics increasingly adopted this playful and teasing attitude towards me as I became more involved with serious jobs in the workshop. In some ways it was the beginning of my political education. I was the boss's son, bright, innocent, and *definitely not one of the workshop mechanics however much I tried to please*. None of them was ever cruel and indeed often they were friendly and generous, but there was at bottom a mistrust which I could never appease. (52, my emphasis)

Though young Allon realises that he will never be welcome in their inner circle, he nonetheless has a strong sense of commitment towards these men, and often feels torn between the workshop and his family. A case in point is when the workers make misuse of his loyalty and good-naturedness when "'borrowing' a gallon of oil or some tool or other for home" (52) in plain sight. The narrator tells us that as a child he realised that "[the mechanics] knew that [he] wouldn't betray the theft and they also knew it made [him] feel awkward and ashamed" (52). And in this they are also proven right, for though White declares that "They took advantage of [his] youth to revenge themselves upon [his] grandfather, father and the firm itself" (52), and that he felt sorry for his dad, he says he would not tell on them "but [would sit] silently, unable to betray the men for whom [he] was now a kind of occasional apprentice" (52). Because he does not tell his parents what he knows but sides with the men from the garage, one could say that he excludes *himself* from his family. At the same time, however, he is shut out from the workshop precisely because he is the proprietor's son. This means that he is neither completely part of his family nor of the fraternity of mechanics and workers, and that he does not quite fit in with either world.

On the matter of not belonging, Paul Allatson and Jo McCormack comment on a point previously made, namely that the condition of exile extends far beyond being physically dispossessed of one's home. Taking recourse to Hamid Naficy's work on exile, they write that "internal exile may be manifested as a form of social limitation and immobility [...] Beyond those sites of official dislocation, supposedly benign institutions such as the familial home, and social conditions such as enforced or prolonged unemployment, may also function as sites of exile" (11). It follows that internal exile—i.e. the state of not fitting in either at home or with society—is as devastating in its consequences as any removal from one's native land. With this in mind, Allon White can be regarded as an internal exile on two accounts, and as being subjected to dispossession because of familial as well as communal alienation.

The workshop and the family, however, are not the only spheres where White experiences a sense of homelessness. Another world which he frequents but which he does not quite belong to is the realm of academia. Within the triad of the garage, the home and the university, the most apparent juxtaposition to be made is between the first and the latter domain. The aim in contrasting the university and the workshop is, essentially, to set the "high" against the "low," and to see how moving between such disparate worlds affects the protagonist.

It needs to be stressed that it is White himself who designates the different worlds he frequents as high and low. He establishes the world of the garage as the low in his section devoted to Ken, one of the workshop-men. He tells us that "[Ken] put on little acts of deliberate vulgarity: excavated his huge nose with his oily fingers crooked like crow's feet [...]. He could fart prodigiously and at will [...]. He would drink Tizer and belch

magnificently" (53). A classic example of the grotesque,[5] Ken is said not only to have had an enduring influence on White's life but also to have prompted his interest in Bakhtinian theory, especially the carnivalesque:

> [Ken] taught me to swear and I still do—his sinister, hilarious lessons in fuckpissshit have become an unstable, eruptive substratum to my cultured university language. He used the grotesque and the lower body and dirty orifices and taught me all the Bakhtin I know. (53)

From the above one can infer that the higher and lower world cannot be kept apart, for more than being a foil to the academic world, the environment of the garage is an "eruptive substratum" (53). In other words, it subtends and violently interrupts the sophisticated academic register White uses when interacting with his university colleagues, and that without any warning. In Kristeva's terms, it is a case of the semiotic making itself felt by disrupting the symbolic.[6] Since the respective domains of the high and the low are impossible to keep apart, one can say that White does not categorically belong to either world, but that he has internalised both. Significantly, this overlapping of the high and the low and the impact it has on subjectivity is one of the main issues that White addresses together with Peter Stallybrass in their book *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. On this matter, the writers maintain that "cultural categories of high and low [...] are never entirely separable" (2) and posit that just because middle class subjects have systematically rejected the low, this does not mean they can be categorised as belonging to the high. Indeed, Stallybrass and White believe it is exactly because they have so adamantly spurned that which has been designated as vulgar or crude that the bourgeoisie has incorporated the low:

> The bourgeois subject continuously defined and re-defined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as 'low'—as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating. Yet that very act of exclusion was constitutive of its identity. The low was internalized under the sign of negation and disgust.
> But disgust always bears the imprint of desire. These low domains, apparently expelled as 'Other', return as the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination. (191)

Allon White's memoir exemplifies the above theory for, as we have seen, his character is formed by both the high and the low, by both the university and the workshop. Of course, the fact that he moves between these domains does not only mean that his sense of self is

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[5] In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression,* Stallybrass and White write that "Grotesque realism imagines the human body as multiple, bulging, over- or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete. The openings and orifices of this carnival body are emphasized, not its closure and finish" (9).

[6] In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva famously posits that "We shall distinguish the semiotic (drives and their articulations) from the realm of signification, which is always that of a proposition or judgment [...] a realm of *positions*" (39-40, emphasis original). Further she argues that "These two modalities are inseparable within the *signifying process* that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse [...] involved; in other words, so-called natural language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and the symbolic. [...] the necessary dialectic between the two modalities [...] is constitutive of the subject. Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both" (34, emphasis original).

influenced by different social strata, but also that he spends less time at home. For being subjected to the gravitational pull of the academic world on the one hand and the world of the garage on the other necessarily entails the subject leaving his familial abode. The upshot of this is not only that White is estranged from his family, but also that the uneasiness he experiences on account of being torn between different worlds is exacerbated. In what follows I delve deeper into White's sense of familial alienation. I posit that while he lists a number of reasons for distancing himself from his family—and while he is aware of the consequences this has for the self—there is also something that he fails to notice, and that this can only be brought to light with the help of the reader.

Guilt

One of the reasons White offers for the estrangement from his family is his decision to break free from the family firm. So as to explain why he does not take up his position in the business, the narrator provides us with detailed background information on his ancestral history, and we learn all about the Whites and how they have lived in Cranfield for a couple of centuries. We discover that "for most of that time the men of the family were village artisans and craftsmen" (45) but that they then moved into engineering and motor mechanics so that, when White came into the world, they were the owners of "a small but modestly successful village garage" (46). For generations Allon White & Son (as the business was known since World War One) was handed down from father to son. Being "the only son, the final son" (48), White tells us he was next in line to take over the family firm. He also divulges that this always made him feel trapped, and that the knowledge that his future career had already been decided on filled him with anxiety. Speaking of the sign above the family firm, White tells us how much the expectation that he would continue the family tradition used to weigh down on him:

> My name is Allon White. Throughout my childhood and growing up it was *my* name on the sign over the garage and over the post office, and on the letter-heads and the envelopes. From long before my birth I was enchained in that *Allon White & Son* as thoroughly as young Paul in *Dombey & Son*. It was as if both the past and the future were already firmly in place, me to replace grandfather, my son to replace me in an endless, pre-ordained chain of signifiers. My prescribed destiny seemed written up on the housefront for all to see. How cruelly, how closely the convention of '… & Son' can bind business and genealogy together: the old family firm. (48)

Refusing his place in the family business, however, does not only have to do with resisting a future in which he has no say. White namely also declares an innate abhorrence for the type of manual work his father does (or used to do) in the workshop. This becomes apparent when he thinks back and recalls his father's hands. He tells us they were "dirty, oily hands. They [were] calloused and cracked, with the grime deep black in the cuts and grazes round his knuckles. […]. They [were] rough and smelly […]" (50). He goes on to intimate that even as a child he knew that "I don't want hands like that. I never want hands like that" (50). While he

disapproves of the hands-on type of work his father does, White also mentions that he never wanted the stress that comes along with having one's own business. In fact, so intensely does he dislike his dad taking home the problems he has at work that "It confirmed [him] in [his] hardening decision that [he] would never work as [his father] had done, that [he] would never suffer the same helplessness and frustration, that [he] would never work in the garage" (56).

In addition to resisting a line of work that does not appeal to him in any way as well as objecting to the very notion of having his life and career prematurely chiseled out, White goes on to give us another reason for breaking with tradition, namely that he cannot identify with the values of his lower middle-class English family.[7] This is evident when he refers to his father's way of running the firm as "rooted in the scrupulous petit-bourgeois accountancy of the English Protestant ethic" (57), or when he collectively alludes to the male members of his family as being "Practical, hard-working, unpretentious, without wide ambitions [...]" (46). Interestingly, the females among the Whites are said to "have always been somewhat more ambitious and class-conscious than their husbands" (46-47). Here White singles out his grandmother on his father's side, a woman who "had studied music in Paris" (47), who came from "gentry stock and introduced a new level of social accomplishment into the family" (47). Considering her interest in the arts and her attempts to improve "the rustic manners of her husband, children and grandchildren" (47), it is not hard to see where White might have got his interest from to enter the world of middle-class university professors and better his social standing.

Jacqueline Rose has remarked that Allon White's "journey [is] from the garage to the academy, from dirt to refinement, from the 'fuckpissshit' of the favourite garage-hand of his childhood to the 'dismal sacred word' of high culture [...]" (183-184). As to why he decides to make this journey in the first place, it appears that White defects to the university because, as he tells us himself, he feels the need to "[break] away from a pre-ordained class and family history" (48). But moving away from his class and culture also means breaking with family tradition, and he soon learns that this does not come without a price. White tells us that as his determination to follow his own (career) path became apparent, "[his father] began to look around for other people who might take [his] place in Allon White & Son" (56). When his dad finally decides to make the Italian Giuseppi a partner, the narrator says "Jo effectively became my substitute, my replacement, and I felt a mixture of guilt and relief at the arrangement" (57). Thus, though he finally gets what he wants, he is also troubled by the idea that he will not be following in his father's footsteps. Remembering his dad's capabilities as a welder, he seems saddened by the thought that he might be missing out on something altogether:

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[7] In an essay entitled "'Mercantile Monasteries': Shops, Shop Assistants, and Shop Life in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain," Christopher P. Hosgood cites Geoffrey Crossick for "[suggesting] that small business interests and white collar employees be designated the two wings of a residual lower middle class" (322). Being the owners of a small business themselves, the Whites might be classified as petit bourgeoisie.

> No one could weld like my father. I loved working late in the darkened workshop beside him [...] I often stood by his side watching him [...] filled with excitement and envy. Perhaps there was also a kind of oedipal longing, for welding was a man's job in the garage and learning to weld was a rite of passage—one which I never accomplished. (53)

From the passage above it can be inferred that, after a fashion, White is grieved by the fact that he has not taken over the reins from his father. Looking back on the events some years later he realises how much relinquishing his position in the family actually affected him. He tells us "In retrospect, I see that this wrench away from my ascribed place in the chain of names was both more protracted and traumatic than I realized at the time" (48-49). Thus one can say that, although he undoubtedly wants to loosen the family ties, White feels remorse for getting himself out of familial obligations and for wanting to be free from the heritage of petit bourgeoisie.

But White's unease within the family set-up runs deeper than not wanting to continue the family tradition. In a fragment entitled "The Realm of Estrangement," he divulges that the reason "[he has] spent most of [his] life feeling estranged from [his] parents" (41) has less to do with feeling guilty about breaking with the family firm than it has to do with his younger sister, Carol, who drowned in a pond near their home when White was a child of five. Recalling the tragic events of the day when Carol went missing and the whole town was looking for her, he reveals how much he was affected by the happenings and how he had accepted "complete and sole responsibility for her death" (42):

> There were policemen standing awkwardly in the kitchen, anguished tears from my mother carried sobbing round to Grandma's house, whispers, knots of people gathered outside the house, groups of men from the village coming and going throughout the day late into the night. How a child takes on the guilt of death and separation I don't know, but before the body had been found something inside me had already decided that I was responsible for the crime, that I had a dreadful guilty secret that I would henceforth carry with me unknown to myself for thirty years. (42)

In the previous chapter, guilt was seen as one of the many aspects that make up the war survivor's general sense of malaise. In *Too Close to the Bone*, the narrator asserts that the guilty feelings he has about his sister's death do not only to contribute to his malaise but are at the root of it. Because the text suggests a direct relation between guilt and malaise, it appears to exemplify Freudian theory. In *Civilisation and Its Discontents* Freud famously claims that guilt is the single biggest cause of discontent in society. To substantiate the claim, he starts off by arguing that all individuals harbour aggressive impulses. For fear of punishment, however, the subject gives up certain drives. This failed aggression is then introjected by the ego and subsequently appropriated by the superego. Because the violence it would have wanted to vent on others is internalised by the ego, the superego is able to turn the ego's aggressiveness toward the self. Thus one might say that the superego carries on doing the work of the outside authority by continuously monitoring and policing the ego and acting as its conscience. Indeed, since nothing can be kept from the superego—and thinking

evil is as wicked an act as doing it—this internal authority proves to be stricter and less forgiving than its external counterpart. That is to say, because we are afraid of punishment from the outside, we relinquish instinctual gratification and are thereby absolved from our guilt. When it comes to our conscience, however, renouncing aggressive impulses does not have the same effect. Indeed, since our wishes and thoughts linger, we do not feel exonerated from blame but continue to feel guilty (76-82). Freud writes, "Renunciation of the drives no longer has a fully liberating effect [...] the threat of external unhappiness—loss of love, and punishment at the hands of the external authority—has been exchanged for an enduring inner unhappiness, the tension generated by the consciousness of guilt" (82).

Considering the above, *Too Close to the Bone* can be said to provide a textbook example of how the superego can make the individual feel guilty about a wicked thought or deed. In the next section I explore the consequences that a guilty conscience has for the subject. To this end, I look at the ways in which the writer says he has been affected by his sister's death and how it has had both a physical and spiritual impact on his life. I examine, that is, the interaction between bodily and mental unease and analyse how this might increase the subject's sense of loss.

Death and dis-ease

The unease White suffers from on account of his being estranged from his family and his environment is further enhanced by the fact that he has been diagnosed with a deadly disease. The discontent he experiences as a result of being ill is foregrounded in his memoir—already on the very first page do we learn that White is "36 years old, a teacher of literature, and [...] dying of leukaemia" (26). The evident fact that having cancer and undergoing chemotherapy is excruciatingly painful is held before our eyes when the narrator says, "I have fought the thing for two years, I have had two bone-marrow transplants from my sister and more chemotherapy than anyone should ever have to endure" (26). Over and above incurring pain and physical discomfort, a killer disease such as leukaemia also induces mental distress, not least of all because the subject realises he is to be exiled from life for good. That the knowledge of imminent death fills White with dread becomes apparent in the way he depicts the act of dying. He alludes to his own impending death as "the thing" (26), while referring to that of his sister's as "a terrible crime" (42). Writing about how Carol's death affected him, he exposes the dark side of dying and says, "There is none of that elegiac lyricism of drowning and summer afternoons here—gentle *kaddish* for the dead. Here it burns and hurts. It is violent, spasmodic, monstrous" (42). Similarly, describing the last hours of one of the characters from his novel, White presents death as macabre and thus debunks the myth that it is a peaceful journey to a better place:

> So this was dying. Nothing peaceful about it. [...]. Lucas moved his head from side to side very slowly trying to clear his head filled with shapeless and indistinct noises. [...]. Lucas groaned in panic. Something seemed to split and slither deep within his belly. It's not silent not silent at all but loud. [...]. A gleeful confusion of bugs and babble tumbled and

> fell upon him like insects swarming in the darkness. Mosquitoes came, filling up his nose and his mouth until at last his mouth, stuffed with the deafening noises, stiffened into a final rictus of defeat. (34)

Just before Lucas dies he says, "I am alone" (54). On his friend Fabrizio's reassurance that he is right beside his bed keeping watch, Lucas repeats, "But I am alone Fabrizio" (54). Dying, then, is something one has to do on one's own. Taking into account its relentlessly violent nature, it is understandable that White regards death as a monster to be feared. While his attitude towards death is thus unmistakably pessimistic, it is also true that he exhibits a death wish. Speaking of how he started to develop a fascination with dead bodies of water just after Carol drowned, the narrator tells us "In the early days of my leukaemia two years ago I was convinced that *this death wish*, this identification with my drowned sister, was responsible for my illness" (42, my emphasis). Given that White dreads the idea of dying, it seems nonsensical that he would express the wish to die. However, if one considers Freud's postulation that the death and life instinct cannot really be separated from each other,[8] White's feelings turn out to be precisely *not* contradictory or ironic. What they do indicate is that White is caught in a liminal position somewhere between life and death, and between this world and the next. Being thus in limbo, I want to suggest, cannot but add to the sense of homelessness and unease he is already experiencing owing to his being socially and familially displaced.

White's understanding of death, however, is more complex than seeing it as something which leads to seemingly contradictory feelings and to mental unease. For at the same time that he intimates how physical affliction can cause malcontent, he also seems to believe the inverse, i.e. that disease is the outward manifestation of something rotten inside. In this respect, it is instructive to consider what he has written in essays and other texts before returning to his autobiographical work. In a paper he wrote shortly before being diagnosed with leukaemia[9] —and thus before he started doing soul-searching through writing his memoir—White appears to be troubled by the thought that he has been repressing some deep-seated memory for most of his life:

> I am aware that this, for me, is dangerous. It is all a matter of distance. Always I am underdistanced, too close to memory, too close to my past. […]. How *close* now, how perilous the thing must be, the stamping of the beast upon the shore. […]. For some reason as I approach the age of three and thirty something is coming closer and closer to me out of my own past […]. What is it then that insists on visiting me? If it were only in the dark, alone […] then I could perhaps keep it away for a little while yet. But it comes to me now when I am with others […]. It becomes audacious. […]. I know that it is there at the fingersends, lurking amongst the keys, waiting for the right combination of letters to release it howling out at me, free at last. Oh memories, what are you that I have kept you there so long? ("Why am I a Literary Critic?" 59)

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[8] Freud posits in *Civilisation and Its Discontents* that "the two kinds of drive seldom—perhaps never—[appear] in isolation, but [alloy] with one other in different and highly varying […] proportions" (71).

[9] Reference here is to the essay "Why Am I a Literary Critic?" which White wrote c. 1984 and which was first published in 1993. It is also from this work that that the epigraph was taken.

In the extract above, hidden memories are not only seen as a real threat but almost seem to take on physical presence—they are "perilous" and "audacious," a "thing" and a "beast" (59). What is also clear is that while White is terrified at the idea of repressed memories resurfacing, he simultaneously displays a desire to know what they are. This is not only evinced by his use of apostrophe in the abovementioned quote but also in another passage in the same essay. Coming closer to that which he pinpoints in his later work as being the essence of his guilty conscience, he writes "The fear is of drowning […]. I see water and the lilies and the reeds and the weeds and unless I can understand all that then I am as dead. I have come too close. […]. And yet of course I know that unless I come to terms with those memories all is a mask, a screen" (60). This suggests that White realises it is only by uncovering the secrets buried in his unconscious that he can be restored to his self, irrespective of how painful that process might be. Though it is possible that he is speaking metaphorically, i.e. saying that if he keeps on repressing the past it will kill him off mentally or spiritually, White's statement seems to be meant in a far more literal sense. In an essay entitled "Prosthetic Gods in Atrocious Places: Gilles Deleuze/Francis Bacon," White intimates that repressed angst can actually attack the body. He posits, "interior terror and subliminal anxiety […] turn our bodies into the battleground of our fears" (161). Further he postulates that our bodies are left with the burden of dealing with thoughts that cannot be otherwise assimilated. Discussing Deleuze's evaluation of Francis Bacon's art, he writes:

> Deleuze is particularly fine in his formal analyses of […] separate hysterical elements in Bacon's work, the rendering visible of those hidden, convulsive forces which seize the body in its flight from panic. 'The hysteric' wrote Freud, 'simply represses.' It falls to the body to expel those phobic monstrosities which the mind simply cannot acknowledge: they are voided, vomited, denied. (164)

The notion that our bodies become the battleground where guilt and repression fight things out is underscored by what White writes in his essay "Language and Location in *Bleak House*" (1978). Here it is intimated that illness results from harbouring secrets, and the contention made that in Dickens's novel "metaphorical and real diseases […] cling to certain centres of secrecy and closure […]. Sickness and malignancy spread out from those places where there are secrets and mysteries cutting people off from each other and breeding mistrust and antagonisms" (101). This suggests that repressed secrets can acquire material existence and attack the body, an idea which is corroborated by what White writes in *Too Close to the Bone*. For here he intimates that his guilt is so grave that he has internalised his sister. More specifically, Carol is said to take on a physical aspect and to help make up what (more than who) he is. Accordingly, White tells us when he was first diagnosed with cancer he was certain that he got sick because he had identified so closely with Carol. He then tries to convey how he felt bound to her, and how she forcefully infiltrated his being and usurped his body:

> Three things, tangled up together but separate, seemed involved. The first was identification: inside me somewhere Carol actually constituted a part of my being, she was me. Not as a part of my personality, but as something much more physical, *an hysterical body*, a violence which terrifies me even when expressed as mere words here on the page. I can hardly begin to approach this level of my being: Here Be Monsters. (42, my emphasis)

In the previous chapter we saw Bella intruding into the realm of the living and Jakob responding to her voice and her touch. Though haunted by his sister's ghost Jakob, however, does not experience her proximity as violent. Instead, he is reluctant to let go of her because he is terrified of being left alone. In contrast, Carol's physical manifestation is blood-curdling. So much does White feel invaded by her presence that he says "There is no wholeness. I am not *myself* here. I can bear to stay here no longer" (42, emphasis original). Because Carol, in other words, makes herself felt, she succeeds in alienating her brother from his own self, thereby making his life unbearable.

White, in short, intimates that the nature of his guilt is such that it becomes material and injects itself as a kind of foreign body into the self. Here it runs riot, afflicting him with emotional as well as physical pain. Indeed, so aggressive a force is it that it is said to induce disease; accordingly, he tells us, "Carol had threatened to take my life away. Carol had made me ill" (43). Nonetheless, White has his doubts, for while he avows that "two years ago I was convinced that this death wish, this identification with my drowned sister, was responsible for my illness" (42), he at other times believes it is all coincidence:

> It is impossible to say whether my illness is connected with the death of my sister all those years ago. Perhaps, as I sometimes think, it is pure biological malignancy quite unrelated to my spiritual life, a random incident at the level of genetic material and swarming cells as far removed from my unconscious and my history as some galaxy remote in the heavens. Yet the prescience of my fiction disturbs me. Malaria. Leukaemia. Disease of the blood. (41)

White says "the prescience of my fiction disturbs me" (41). This means that while he cannot know for sure whether there is any relation between his guilt and his illness, he is perturbed by the many similarities between his own life and his fiction, and he wonders whether he had not perhaps already anticipated in his novel that he was going to die of leukaemia.[10] For the fact of the matter is that both White and his fictional counterpart Lucas

[10] There are indicators besides "the prescience of [his] fiction" (41) that point towards White's belief in the supernatural. When he, for instance, talks about finding a bone marrow donor, White says "There seemed something marvellously providential when we discovered that my sister Debbie was a perfect match" (43). He seems to believe that Debbie's good deed can cancel out the malevolence Carol (her twin) had caused, thereby restoring the balance in his life (43). Further he plants a tree in Carol's memory because, he tells us, "I needed to be able to bury her at last […]. I needed to let go of her" (44). The above might be interpreted in more than one way: first, it might signify White's attempt at dabbling in magic realism and at entertaining the thought that mortality can be avoided in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, it might be understood as a sign of his taking refuge in mysticism. It could then be, as Tom Ratekin has argued, that "a form of satisfaction is gained from discarding medical discourse and pursuing the psychological and mystical" (40). Alternatively, it might be seen as White's affirmation of the hierarchy of worldly forces, and his assumption that as nature reigns over science, the preternatural reigns over nature, thereby increasing his chances of recovery. Significantly, all these readings bring to the fore White's mental agitation and/or physical discomfort. Suggesting that there are higher forces at play in the world is therefore, to me at least, indicative of the fact that White is trying to cope with his situation.

Arnow are diagnosed with a "Disease of the blood" (41), and both have to accept the fact that science cannot protect them against nature. Given this close identification,[11] it is significant that we are informed "[Lucas] is poisoned, not so much by the malarial swamp [...]. It is really within himself that the poison develops" (32). White goes on to specify that "It is precisely the *absence* of magical vision and rage within him, or at least their deep and irrecoverable repression, which cankers his soul" (32, emphasis original). With this in mind, and not forgetting that his body of work intimates how repressed memories can gain material presence and attack the body, one could argue along with Jacqueline Rose that in White's memoir "death [is] the consequence of the failure to confront the inner recesses of the mind" (181). Having a killer disease, in other words, is regarded not so much a matter of biology or genetics but rather of harbouring secrets in the unconscious.

The notion that a guilty conscience can cause physical illness is obviously debatable. However, as we are dealing with a literary text it seems of little importance to ascertain whether or not it has been empirically proven that a troubled mind can lead to a deadly disease. What is significant, in other words, is not to consider whether mental and physical unease are connected, but to ask why White chooses to tell his story in a way which suggests there is such a link, and what this means in narrative terms. Rather than debating whether or not repression can induce cancer, we then need to focus on the fact that White believes it can. This in turn means we need to think about what it is that he might be repressing and how this might be concealed in the text—an endeavour to which I turn in what follows.

Drowning

Throughout his memoir, White evinces a need to pinpoint that which has infected his soul, i.e. to reveal that which is hidden in the unconscious. Towards the start of the text he avows:

> Several things still puzzle me. I will tell you about the novel and you will have to see what you think—I know that a central knot of my life and unconscious world is tied up in that abortive fiction, but I cannot quite touch it myself. Perhaps the roots of my illness are there in that early attempt to write a novel. Certainly it now seems like it, years later. (27)

But while White initially invites the reader to help him un-puzzle his life, during the course of the narrative he determines by himself that "the roots of [his] illness" (27) are closely related to the remorse he feels about Carol and about how she died. White's belief that his unease is a consequence of the guilt he feels over his sister's death is underlined by the attention the text pays to the lethal nature of water. More than the fact that it is ubiquitous, it is the way in which water is depicted which foregrounds its menacing quality. One example is

[11] On the matter of identification, Peter Stallybrass compares his friend's dying moments with that of Lucas Arnow. According to Stallybrass, "Allon White died at home, wearing his pajamas, in exactly the posture in which Lucas, the protagonist of the novel he wrote many years before but never published, died" ("Worn Worlds: Clothes and Mourning" 41).

when White describes the disused system of waterways and trenches that made up his playground as a child:

> [The village's] abandoned moats and watercourses were a secret domain which filled my days. Concealed by copses of willow, bullrushes and overgrown hedgerow, there was a magical calm and concealment about this marshy realm. There was something melancholic and a little frightening, too, since the water never flowed. All these ponds and moats were green and stagnant, as still as death. (38)

The danger of water is not restricted to the actual world but also appears as a leitmotif in *Gifts*. The reason for mentioning White's fictional tale here is not only the fact that parts of it are included—as well as commented on—in White's memoir but especially because it focuses so strongly on the threat water poses. To elucidate: the story features two main threads, each with its own protagonist; there is Nicodemus, a "17th-century religious fanatic" (28), and there is Lucas Arnow, a modern hydraulic engineer. In both parts of the narrative, water plays a key role—Nicodemus journeys "from the Midland to the Fens [...] because he had a vision that the fenland marshes were the place of salvation" (28), and Arnow, in Sardinia, is charged with "draining the *stagni*, or foetid coastal marshes in which the malarial mosquitoes breed" (30). Both stories end badly for the protagonists, though; while Nicodemus in the end does not find his "sacred marsh but a drainage channel straight as the arrow of God" (29), Arnow dies of malaria, the very thing he was summoned to eliminate. The way Arnow dies is ironic for we are told that it is precisely the latent danger in water which he detests. Considering the narrator's assertion that "the more I begin to unravel this cathartic fiction of mine from the past, the more connections I feel and understand" (30), Lucas Arnow's intense dislike for the havoc water can wreak can be seen as reflecting the attitude of the author himself:

> [Lucas Arnow] works for the common good and with a revulsion against the evils of the marshland—its disease, its mire, its stagnant dangers. He believes strongly in clearing up mess. The foetid pools and malarial reedbeds of the marsh represent, for him, all that civilization has had to struggle against in order to emerge from the primeval slime. (31)

In a cruel twist of fate, it is precisely he who is sent to contain water and curb its dangers who dies a water-related death. Thus Lucas Arnow, scientist and engineer, is made to face the fact that science cannot quite control the forces of nature and that man cannot always be kept safe from death and disease. That modern technology is not capable of shielding us from death is presumably also the realisation White comes to, first when Carol dies and later when he himself is diagnosed with cancer. Writing for *London Review of Books*, John Barrell corroborates that White found it hard to accept the fact that nature could be so unforgiving and cause so much ruin. Seeing him both before and after being diagnosed with cancer, Barrell writes that White

> could still be as angry as ever, not with others and not with himself, but with nature, or what one bit of it could do to another. 'Allon' means oak, apparently, in Hebrew, and this became the basis of a tart comparison between what cancer was doing to his body and what the hurricane of 1987 had done to the Sussex landscape. (21)

This anger with water and other forces of nature becomes evident when reading White's memoir. Paradoxically, however, while water represents danger it is also omnipresent in the text. A case in point is when we learn about young Allon's fascination with water and about how he would frequent Cranfield's back country of "Ditches, streams, ponds and pools" (37). "This was my world," (37) he tells us, "a secret domain which filled my days" (38). While at first glance it might not seem out of the ordinary for a child to play around in a remote area, there is more that needs to be considered here. For, as intimated above, White displays an *obsession* with water; indeed, he himself admits that he was so intrigued by the bodies of water outside the village that "the gloomy enchantment of those stagnant places held [him] in thrall" (39). He also divulges the reason for his obsession, and tells us

> […] it was only four years ago, at the age of 32, that I began to learn *why* these marshy moats and stygian pools have exerted such an exorbitant grip upon my unconscious throughout my life.
> I came to learn that the most important single event of my childhood was the death of my young sister, Carol. […]. Certainly, when I wrote the novel my drowned sister never entered my head. But all those marshes and swamps […] how clearly now they seem displacements of my childhood mourning and terror, my obsessive lingering at the pool's edge summer and winter all the years of my growing up. (39, emphasis original)

Considering what he reveals in the quote above, White's fixation with water (whether evinced in the actual or fictional world) can be regarded as an outward manifestation of the fact that he has accepted the blame for his sister's death.[12] Put differently, because he has a guilty conscious about Carol drowning, White is constantly drawn to water. What this means is that Carol controls his life *in absentia*, as he tells us himself:

> Without the least suspicion, I had lived, worked and loved in the shadow of [Carol's] death. Its hold upon me had been as complete as it was unsuspected. (39)

The power Carol has over her brother is manifested in at least three ways. First, she is seen as being directly responsible for alienating him from the rest of his family. Further she is said to have forcefully replaced his self with her own, thereby making it impossible for him to find a way out of his internal alienation. Finally, the guilt he feels on account of her dying induces him to constantly replay and reinvoke the events of the day in a type of repetition compulsion. Now, it might be that by either drawing closer to water or avoiding it, White ensures that *he* will be the one to decide when to make Carol appear and when to make her go

[12] White's fascination with water is an example of obsessional neurosis; according to Laplanche and Pontalis "In the most typical form of obsessional neurosis, the psychical conflict is expressed through *symptoms* which are described as compulsive—obsessive ideas, compulsions towards undesirable acts, struggles against these thoughts and tendencies, exorcistic rituals, etc.—and through a *mode of thinking* which is characterised in particular by rumination, doubt and scruples, and which leads to inhibitions of thought and action" (281, emphasis original).

away. Therefore it is possible that engaging in what might be called his own version of the fort-da game gives White the feeling that he is in control.[13] It is, then, feasible that replaying the circumstances surrounding Carol's death allows White to make the traumatic memory he has more bearable. However, considering the fact that he spends more time playing around dead bodies of water than anywhere else in Cranfield, a contrary reading of his compulsion to repeat seems more plausible. In the next section I consequently argue that White's frequently and deliberately repeating his sister's drowning is less a result of his wanting to be in control than of his desire to constantly remind himself of his guilt and to punish himself for it.[14] Further I posit that while White believes such a self-castigating gesture might help him come to terms with repressed secrets and achieve catharsis, the text suggests that constantly recalling the past exacerbates rather than alleviates his emotional pain.

Repetition

In the previously referred to paper on *Bleak House,* White talks about the significance of repetition in Dickens's novel. He starts off by referring to the way in which Lady Dedlock's secret is gradually divulged and argues that

> acts of rediscovery and recovery make the narrative largely retrospective, a movement forward which is in fact a movement back and repeated *in knowledge*. Indeed, repetition is the founding movement in *Bleak House* (88-89, emphasis original)

Going back to the past in *Bleak House* is moreover said to be marked by compunction; White writes, "Turning back at a moment dominated by a mixture of guilt and regret, it is an attempt to return and correct a past which went wrong" (93). While going back to the past, then, foremost has to do with making amends for one's misdeeds, White also intimates that repetition is a means of discovering some piece of information that has been concealed from the conscious; accordingly, "the revelation of a secret is only a repetition, it repeats what already *was* simply by its recovery" (98, emphasis original).

White addresses the notion of returning to the past in order to uncover things believed to be wiped out from memory in his autobiographical fragment. Here he posits that memory is that faculty of the mind which allows us to recall things that are deeply buried. Memory, as he understands it, is "Not so much memories as things forgotten and found again. Remembrance" (28). What White seems to be intimating here is that underlying his own

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[13] In *Final Acts*, Tom Ratekin writes that "'Fort-Da' is primarily thought of as the game in which the child throws a reel attached to a string over the side of the cot, yelling 'fort' ('gone'), which he then retrieves by pulling the string and stating 'da' ('there'). […]. Freud connects the child's playing of the game to the absence of the mother […]. Freud's observation of this repetition of an apparently unpleasurable action (throwing away the object) leads him to a temporary dead end, however, because—as he explains—the repetition turns into pleasure through mastery, and therefore the actions still follow the pleasure principle" (14).

[14] This is in agreement with what Freud posits in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: "But we come now to a new and remarkable fact, namely that the compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never, even long ago, have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses which have since been repressed" (20).

repetition compulsion—the urge to replay the circumstances surrounding his sister's drowning—is the drive to exhume secret memories, i.e. that the reason he revisits past events is to uncover that which has been stowed away in the unconscious.

Much like Jakob who, as we saw in the previous chapter, replays the trauma of his childhood in his dreams, White repeatedly invokes a painful memory. This ostensibly helps him to uncover feelings of guilt as well as to gain self-knowledge. What it does not do, however, is restore him to mental health. Considering that recalling traumatic events theoretically also allows abreaction to take place,[15] it is significant that replaying the happenings of the day when Carol went missing does not succeed in reducing White's sense of unease. While it, then, allows him to pinpoint that which he believes has tormented him throughout his life, it is not cathartic and does not cure his obsession with the past. This becomes clear in the following passage where he says that water still has as much a hold over him as when he was a child:

> I remember one afternoon not too long after Carol's death when I was wandering aimlessly around the old greenhouse at the bottom of the garden. [...]. At the back of the greenhouse there was a waterbutt filled to the brim. [...]. I was quite alone and I stood on tiptoe grasping the edge of the rusted butt staring at the water's reflective surface of thick green liquid. [...]. I seem to be held there for ever, *even now*, peering into the depths of water, trying to get down beneath the surface, amongst the coiled stems of the lilies and the shoals of tiny white wireworms wriggling and disappearing into the green depths. (41, my emphasis)

By using the present tense in the last sentence and by declaring that "even now" (41) he is enthralled by water, White is intimating that "even now" he cannot let go of the past, that "even now" he cannot stop his compulsion to invoke childhood events, and that "even now" he cannot be cured of his feelings of unease. Therefore one might conclude that repeating the past does not take away White's sense of loss. As to why this might be the case, there are indications in the text that suggest there is something besides the death of White's sister which he is repressing and not dealing with. That is to say, there is something unpleasant in his past that White has not yet uncovered and which needs to be brought to the surface if he is to experience emotional cleansing and find his way back to the self.

Maternally absent

By implementing auto-psychoanalysis, White determines that the reason for his sense of estrangement and for his dis-ease is the guilt he feels about his sister's death. In what follows I examine this assertion in more detail. While I do not refute that a guilty conscience takes its toll on body and mind alike, I argue that White's discontent runs deeper than feeling accountable for what he did (or did not do) as a child of five. By virtue of the fact that we are dealing with *repression*, I posit that there is bound to be a secret which White has overlooked and which he has not yet disinterred. I argue that by taking over the reins and so to speak

[15] On the role of abreaction and catharsis in psychotherapy, see Laplanche & Pontalis (1-2; 60-61).

acting as psychoanalysts, we might get to the core of White's displacement. To this end, we should ask not so much what he is confronting as what he is *not* telling us. We, then, should look at what he is omitting or glossing over and see if we can identify that which he has repressed—in his memoir as well as in his unconscious.

During the course of the narrative it transpires that it was not only White who felt he had a part in Carol's death but that the other family members had also "[taken] up the burden alone, never dreaming that [they] had all done the same" (42). The fact that they never talk about this has dire consequences for each of them individually and also adversely affects the relationships they have with one another. Not only does it leave White under the misapprehension that he had seen Carol walking in the direction of the pond and that he could have prevented her death,[16] but it also drives the family apart. This, as David Kuhl notes, is a common phenomenon when people harbour secrets, especially when these secrets are accompanied by self-reproach:

> Individuals, families, groups, and organizations keep secrets. In turn, secrets keep individuals, secrets keep families, secrets isolate and hold their keepers hostage. Essentially, people keep secrets and secrets keep people. If those secrets are linked to guilt and shame, they are all the more powerful in their ability to isolate and silence the secret-keeper, to prevent him from speaking the truth. (172)

That "secrets keep families" (Kuhl 172) so that they gradually become alienated from one another is evidently the case with the Whites; the narrator in *Too Close to the Bone* avows that "Up until my illness I felt more and more alarmed that as my parents got older they would die before we had said how much we cared for each other, before we forgave each other" (41). Ironically, it is only three decades later and in the face of his own death that White manages to partially patch things up. Amongst others, he becomes reconciled with his father; he tells us, "[My father] has held me to him. He cares for me "(41). Another family member White is brought nearer to thanks to his illness is Carol's surviving twin sister, Debbie. This is because Debbie's bone marrow closely matches that of her brother, and that by being a donor she feels she can be of some use to him in his battle against cancer. White writes that "[Debbie] was proud and happy to be able to help fight for my life. Always somewhat distant from each other in the past, we were suddenly brought really close" (43).

That White singles out his sister and his father as those family members with whom he has reestablished close relations suggests a gap in the narrative. In *Over Her Dead Body,* Elisabeth Bronfen analyses what Freud's account of his grandson playing with a bobbin reveals about the author himself. She argues the fact that Freud moves his attention away from the child's mother—his daughter Sophie who died not long after Freud had completed the second chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—points towards the importance of the missing mother. This moreover not only entails the idea that "behind the narrative figure of a

[16] White divulges about halfway through the narrative that his mother later assured him he could not have seen Carol making her way to the pond because he was not around at the time she disappeared (40). I return to White's screen memory later in the section.

mother's absence [stands] the real event of a daughter's death" (19) but also the notion that underlying Freud's work is an awareness of his own mortality:

> What Freud significantly omits to say directly in [the second] footnote is that the mother whose absence is repeatedly staged long before any real absence occurs is his daughter, and that the real loss [...] is a loss Freud experienced as an insurmountable wound/ offence to his narcissism, so that he had to postpone mourning ('that will come later') by replacing it with work. (29)

Thus Freud's writing about his grandson is a displacement of that which is at the heart of his concerns, namely the death of his daughter as well as his own. This type of analysis can be used to great effect in *Too Close to the Bone*. That is, one might identify an underlying narrative by juxtaposing that which is written about with that which has been glossed over. At first glance, White's fragment seems to invite a similar interpretation to what Bronfen argues for Freud's text. As White is writing about his sister's death, in other words, it is tempting to argue that he does so in order to eschew writing about his own. However, considering the sheer amount of textual space White devotes to discussing his illness, it does not seem plausible that he writes about Carol so as to avoid confronting his own mortality. Thus one needs to delve deeper and see what White precisely does *not* write about and what he does *not* pay attention to. And what transpires when looking closer is that the person one would expect to occupy a central position in the narrative is pushed to the periphery. Though she might not be completely missing from the story, the little amount of textual space allotted his mother, as well as what is said about her, indicates that White writes about his sister's drowning, not so much because he cannot write about his own death as because he cannot talk about the woman who brought him into the world, and about that which lies at the root of his malaise.

That there is something amiss in White's relationship with his mother is, then, apparent both from what he says as well as from what he neglects to say about her. Concerning the latter, White mentions his mother only on a few occasions and then only in a brief sentence or sentence fragment, and almost always incidentally. In comparison, he talks about his father at length, spends at least two full paragraphs telling us how he was reunited with his sister Debbie, and gives us a detailed rundown of the ancestral women in his father's family. He makes mention of other women to boot, including his ex-wife, his aunt who lives in Grimsby, his great-aunt Tess, the women of the village where he lives and Janet, the woman who used to work in the family's filling station.

Besides the little spatial attention afforded his mother, how White talks about her as well as what he says are instructive. The first time his mother makes an appearance is in the sketch entitled "A Screen Memory." Here White describes the events of the day when Carol drowned. He tells us that, as he has remembered the events, though he saw Carol going off on her own on the day she died he "[called] neither to [his] mother nor to Carol" (40). Directly following the screen memory, the narrator mentions his mother for the second time:

> This [screen] memory, etched into my mind with the clarity of total recall, is false. I was not in the garden at the time when [Carol] wandered off. According to my mother, I was elsewhere, playing with a friend in his garden. I couldn't have seen her go. It was impossible. I was not there. (40)

The curt tenor evinced in the excerpt above, and especially in the last three successive short sentences, suggests that White resents (rather than appreciates) the fact that his mother has dismissed his memory of the day outright. Thus it is possible that White *wants* to believe that he knew about his sister's heading towards the pond as this would allow him to share in the family's guilt. By telling him that he could not have been there, in other words, his mother is excluding him from the Whites' collective sense of compunction and in this way from the rest of the family. The suspicion that White harbours resentment towards his mother is enhanced by the fact that the very next lines of the memoir read "Since I contracted leukaemia, my father and I have been much closer. There is no chance now of being unfinished with another" (40-41).[17] This begs the question what about being closer to his mother? As he has just invoked his mother in the previous section, in other words, wouldn't it have made writerly (or even common) sense to continue talking about his mother and about their relationship at this point, regardless of whether it was good or bad?

That White might be eschewing talking about his mother finds corroboration in the fact that he never openly addresses the issue. The only time in the narrative where he hints at his feelings for his mother is when he recalls the day Carol died and the "anguished tears from [his] mother carried sobbing round to [his] Grandma's house" (42). As he never takes this any further or analyses his emotions, his mentioning his mother's grief in passing suggests that there is a rift, albeit an unconscious one, between mother and son. The notion that their relationship is impersonal is reinforced by the syntax, for in the quote above White's mother is relegated to a position within a reduced passive relative clause.

A *lexical* indication that White is uncomfortable talking about his feelings for his mother is evident from the fact that any allusion to their relationship is always embedded in sentences which simultaneously refer to both his mother and father. That is to say, whenever he talks about his feelings for her, she is implicated but never explicitly mentioned. A case in point is when he tells us "I have spent most of my life feeling estranged from my parents in some vague and indefinite way" (41). As pointed out before, while he goes on to say that he reestablishes the bond with his father, he never mentions the same happening with his mother. Thus it seems that he still feels alienated from her, but that he either cannot talk about it or that he does not realise it fully himself.

That White and his mother have a strained relationship is also evident from the fact that three of the seven sentences in which she makes an appearance are pejoratively encoded. The

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[17] "I was not there" (40), the last sentence of "A Screen Memory," is followed by a section entitled "The Realm of Estrangement." While the lines quoted above (in which White describes his relationship with his father) technically belong to this new section, they directly follow White's description of the way in which his memory of the day Carol died was dismissed.

first of these is when the adult narrator thinks back to a time when he was a youngster and would play in his father's garage. One day specifically stands out in his memory:

> The petrol pump attendant was a young woman called Janet and she used to look after me. On sunny days I could play with my matchbox toys on the dusty forecourt between the petrol pumps. […]. Most days I returned home covered in oil. I can remember one summer day when I was sitting on the kerb in front of the garage so covered in grease and dirt that all the village women who went past laughed and told me I'd be in for it when my mother saw me. (50-51)

From the above passage one can infer that some of the memories White has of his mother are unpleasant. For while thinking about his makeshift nanny evokes feelings of being "[looked] after" and of "sunny days" (50), the recollections he has of his mother are associated with being in trouble. A more overt indication that Mrs White might be regarded in negative terms is provided in the section where the narrator talks about his fascination and simultaneous revulsion of Ken. Ken, he tells us, "taught me dirty. 'Go and tell your mother to "fuck off",' he would whisper to me, winking at the other mechanics (did I? I don't remember)" (53). White might not have given his mother the message in person but his memoir certainly suggests that there is no place for her here. As to why this might be so, a couple of possibilities lie before us. One reason is hinted at in a passage quoted before, in which White talks about his "oedipal longing" (53) to be able to weld as well as his father. Laplanche and Pontalis point out two the types of manifestation that the Oedipus complex has in Freudian theory:

> In its so-called *positive* form, the complex appears as in the story of *Oedipus Rex*: a desire for the death of the rival—the parent of the same sex—and a sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex. In its *negative* form, we find the reverse picture: love for the parent of the same sex, and jealous hatred for the parent of the opposite sex. (282-283, emphasis original)

By saying he has an "oedipal longing" (53) to be like his dad, White is therefore not only commenting on the relationship he has with his father but also the relationship he has with his mother. Understood on the negative axis, having an oedipal desire implies love for his father and feelings of animosity towards his mother. Understood, on the other hand, as a positive manifestation of the Oedipus complex it suggests a desire for his mother. Considering that White further says he "really [regrets] that [he] never learned to weld" (53) —and considering the progenitive sense of "weld" as in "cause to combine and form a whole" ("weld" from *The Oxford English Dictionary*)—White seems to be intimating that his wanting to be like his father and to be able to do "a man's job" (53) is predicated on the erotic desire he feels (or felt) for his mother.

A further reason why White might have difficulties writing about his relationship with his mother is because he links her with his immanent death, as the title seems to suggest. That is to say, as no one can be closer to the bone than she who one is originally grafted from,

White's mother might be invoked not only as the person who is *Too Close to the Bone* to be talked about but also as the original life-giving force who is now faltering. Towards the beginning of the story, the narrator says:

> And there is no light now. There was some a little while ago and I should have written then. I also had some within me, a deep blue light the colour of Iris which now and then I could see far inside my body and which glowed and gave me great comfort. But it is really dark now, my blue light has deserted me and it is getting very late. (26)

As it is written with a capital letter, Iris invokes the goddess of Greek mythology. By virtue of the fact that she embodies the rainbow,[18] Iris is associated light and water, and therefore with two life-giving and life-sustaining forces. At the same time, of course, Iris is a woman. White's statement that his Iris light has abandoned him thus implies that his life-giving force is failing him. Indeed, considering the discussion above, if White is not resentful of the fact that his mother has given him life but that she is unable to sustain it, at the very least he seems to be saying that he feels deserted by her in his darkest hour.

The perils of autobiography

White's reticence to talk about certain things leads one to believe that it is not Carol's death which he is repressing (he realises and talks about this at length, after all), but the alienated relationship he has with his mother. Of course, the only reason that one might be in a position to pinpoint that which the writer has been concealing is the fact that he has put his life story to paper. Thus it is in the first place by dint of the written text that hidden feelings can be uncovered and the past theoretically be dealt with. In the latter part of this chapter I accordingly focus on the autobiographical writing process. I start off by exploring why White finally decides to write his memoir after many years of procrastinating and of finding refuge in academic writing. As such, I argue that while he uses his critical work to avoid talking about his life, he can never completely escape writing autobiographically. To this end I point out how, in his essays, White admits that writing his life narrative cannot be put on hold forever but that a time will come when he will have to face the past and deal with feelings of alienation.

White seems to be aware of life writing's ability to help uncover personal truths when he invites the reader to assist him in understanding something about his life. But to say that White compiles his memoir because he cognitively decides to gain self-knowledge is only half the truth, for it transpires that he feels driven to write by a force greater than his conscious self. White explicitly alludes to his compulsion to write about his life in relation to his old

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[18] According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Iris, in Greek mythology, [is] the personification of the rainbow and (in Homer's *Iliad*, for example) a messenger of the gods. According to the Greek poet Hesiod, she was the daughter of Thaumas and the ocean nymph Electra. In Hesiod's works, at least, she had the additional duty of carrying water from the River Styx in a ewer whenever the gods had to take a solemn oath. The water would render unconscious for one year any god or goddess who lied " (par. 1).

novel (which, if we remember, is a kind of allegory for his own life).[19] In fact, he takes great pains to convey that he wrote the story of Nicodemus and Arnow without putting too much effort into it, and that this was a new and extraordinary experience for him:

> […] I was breaking up with my first wife […]. […] pained beyond endurance by the break-up, I suddenly began to write—*in extremis,* you might say […]. I began to write fast and fluently, pages of the stuff, and though my eyes were full of tears and I normally write with pedantic care and exquisite self-consciousness, this time a coherent story sprang from the end of my pen already formed, the fictional names and the narrative all in place without my conscious mind having any idea that all this had been waiting inside me. (27)

White, then, never intentionally contemplates the narrative but writes with "thoughtless fluency" (30). This means he does not have to imagine details pertaining to either place or time, nor invent any characters. Instead, everyone and everything is already there, waiting to come to life on paper. Because White is apparently not in control but serves, as it were, as a vessel for a greater force he tells us "I felt like a mere scribe, a copyist" (30). Further he claims that he did not realise at the time that *Gifts* was, in fact, about his own past. While he says that there must have been some part of him that knew all along that the story was really about Carol, he tells us "when I wrote the novel my drowned sister never entered my head" (39), and asserts that it was only later when he set down his autobiographical fragment that he realised "the death of [his] sister Carol was the secret kernel to [his] marshland fiction" (39).

According to John Barrell, "It is, or so Allon came to believe, this [guilty] secret—whatever it stood for, whatever crouched behind it—that would have found a way, one day, of writing itself in defiance of the distance that [critical] writing was meant to impose" (21). While Barrell is correct in positing that White's unconscious finds its way into his memoir, the assumption that this pertains to Carol is misplaced. In light of the foregoing discussion, it might be argued that because White openly talks about his sister and his guilty conscience, this no longer qualifies as a hidden secret. This does not mean that secrets do no insinuate themselves into his life narrative, but that they are concealed. The other implication of Barrell's statement *is* valid, however, and it is indeed the case that White refrained from writing autobiography for many years. Already on the very first page of his memoir does White avow, "I've waited too long before writing this and now it is late, probably too late" (26).[20] Though no indication is given in *Too Close to the Bone* as to why he waited so long before writing his life story, it is intimated in "Why Am I a Literary Critic?" which was written only a few years before. Here White namely declares that the reason he has stuck to

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[19] As pointed out before, the biographical account of White's life and the story of Nicodemus and Arnow are intricately linked. Therefore, White's assertion that he is driven by some external force to write his fiction might also be understood as his being driven to write his *life story*. Thus it appears that White is under the compulsion to write autobiographically even if he is unaware of this himself at the time of writing.

[20] In "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida," Derrida states that "The space of literature is not only that of an instituted *fiction* but also a *fictive institution* which in principle allows one to say everything" (36, emphasis original). This might account for the fact that White ostensibly found it easier to express his guilt in fiction than autobiography.

literary criticism (and, by implication, avoided autobiography) is that if he started writing about the past, he would be made to face the hidden secrets of the unconscious:[21]

> Writing then is full of dangers. No wonder that I resist it so. No wonder that I fear it, put it off. By the slightest error in the mechanisms of distance I may at any moment be pitched into memory and into hysteria. I write, therefore, along the inner edge of hysteria *all the time* without, up to now, ever knowing it. I remain this side of it by being a literary critic. For in that kind of writing the distance is perfectly manageable. There is no fear involved, merely the subconscious effort of steering away from the matter of my own mind, the modality of consciousness which threatens me more than any other: memory. (60, emphasis original)

Tom Ratekin (in one of the few critical pieces written on *Too Close to the Bone*) offers a psychoanalytic reading of White's engagement in literary criticism. In *Final Acts—Traversing the Fantasy in the Modern Memoir*, Ratekin argues that "Embracing a genre of writing (criticism) that, more than any other, appears least directly evocative of the self, White is able to avoid the monster of memory" (31). Because it shields him from the real, literary criticism, in White's case, is an instance of the psychoanalytic symptom, "a substitute or compromise formation generated by the unconscious […] a method of satisfaction that protects us from the Thing or the lack in the Other" (31). Ratekin goes on to claim, however, that when his marriage falls apart and when he is diagnosed with leukaemia, White's symptom can no longer give him the required protective distance (34). Thus, White takes up autobiographical writing: "When life as he imagined it is shown to be false, it must be reconfigured in a new way, and this autobiographical text provides White with a method to explore those kernels that he sees as essential to understanding his new life" (34).

Literary criticism, in short, keeps Allon White distanced from confronting that which he has repressed. Judging by what he writes in "Why Am I a Literary Critic?" as time goes by he appears to become increasingly aware of his own "subconscious effort of steering away from […] memory" (60). Arguably because his symptom cannot protect him forever he presciently declares, "For some reason as I approach the age of three and thirty something is coming closer and closer to me out of my own past and I know that I shall be a literary critic for very little longer" (59). He anticipates, then, that he will be made to face his past and that soon he will not be able to find protection in writing theory. Thus there is a premonition that unconscious memory will not be kept at bay but violently erupt in autobiographical writing.

Truth in fiction

White foresees in his critical work that hidden memories will be uncovered in non-academic writing. In *Too Close to the Bone* he accordingly expresses the idea that by compiling his memoir, the past will be revealed. However, he tells us that writing autobiography proper is not enough to gain self-knowledge; if this is to be achieved, biographical fact and fiction

[21] On the matter of facing the past, Smith and Watson point out that Suzette Henke uses the term "'scriptotherapy' to signify the process of speaking or writing about trauma in order to find words to give voice to previously repressed memories" (29).

should intermingle and inform on each other.[22] In this section I evaluate to what extent including the novel in his autobiography allows White to disinter secret memories. I consider the efficacy of fiction in bringing to light personal truths and ask what this suggests about the autobiographical genre in general.

In order to assess whether enmeshing fact and fiction can help the autobiographer bring what is hidden to the surface, the close similarities between White's memoir and his fictional tale first need to be established. One indication of how intimately the two texts are related is the fact that they share a leitmotif. As has already been noted, water is ubiquitous and used as a trope to suggest loss in the fictional narrative as well as in White's autobiography. Though White does not realise it at the time he writes his novel, underlying his obsession with water in *Gifts* is his fascination with Cranfield's web of waterways, and the role they play in Carol's death. This is why he says the story is effectively about himself and his guilt; he tells us, "it is clear that Nicodemus, on his slow pilgrimage from the Midlands to the Fens, was in search not only of God and the reeds, but of my own vanished childhood" (38-39).

White further emphasises how intricately the two texts are interwoven by drawing parallels between his life and those of his protagonists. A case in point is when he refers to the detail that both he and Lucas Arnow are diagnosed with a "Disease of the blood" (41). What is more, White seems to believe that his fate is chained to that of Arnow's:

> My novelistic descriptions of Arnow's physical suffering were entirely fanciful at that time, purely imaginary. But since then I have lived through them all. And now, like him, I am dying of a terrible disease. (30)

More than merely identifying with him, Arnow seems to be a part of who White is. Not only are we mimetically made to see their oneness, but we are also diegetically informed that they are connected to each other—the narrator says that "Lucas Arnow the hydraulics engineer was in part the man I should have been had I not broken with my own 'proper' name" (48). This underscores the idea that when White started his novel he was amazed to find that the characters were present and ready to be written, but that as they began to take shape "[He] knew immediately that they were dissociated and egotistic bits of [himself] split by time and place" (28).

While White's actual world is closely linked to that of the novel, he is not initially aware of how much his make-believe characters are related to his person. He says that it was only in hindsight that he was made to understand that the figures and tropes in *Gifts* were "displacements of [his] childhood mourning and terror" (39). In a related vein of thought, White tells us "It is only now and in the light of my old novel that I see how my childhood imagination was formed in close and unconscious connection with the odd, moated history of

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[22] Using fiction in autobiography to gain insight into one's self and one's past is not exclusive to Allon White. Paul John Eakin for one has argued that in their memoirs "[Nathalie] Sarraute and [William] Maxwell demonstrate that the constraint of fact is not necessarily a limitation of artistic freedom, and conversely, the invention of fiction in autobiography may be undertaken in the pursuit of biographical truth" (*Touching the World* 31).

my village" (38). This means that he believes it was only by re-examining the novel and by bringing it in relation to his present life that he was made to see that the key event in his life was his sister's death, and that a guilty conscience was the source of his unease and sense of alienation.

Significantly, White posits that the precise way in which fiction has brought him to understand where his sense of guilt originates from is by providing him with missing details about the past as well as with information about his self. Further, it is through vacillating between the factual and fictional world that he feels these facts were revealed and autognosis achieved:

> But weaving backwards and forwards between childhood memory and recollections of the unfinished fiction, under the duress of my present illness with its closeness of death, I unearth, here and there, bits of understanding and connectedness. (35)

A lengthy example of how moving between the two narratives can provide a missing piece of information and shed light on the past is offered in the section entitled "The Bernoulli Meter." Here we are informed that in the novel, Lucas Arnow's last days are spent in anticipation of a Bernoulli meter which is to be sent from the Italian capital. Feverish with malaria, the meter for Arnow "becomes a sort of talisman or fetish, connected in his mind with his own illness. If the meter arrives then he will live" (54). White ruminates on the importance afforded the Bernoulli meter in the novel, and declares that it is only evident in hindsight that it represents the countless times his father was left feeling defeated and dejected because a component of sorts had not come on time:

> Last week it suddenly occurred to me as so obvious that it made me laugh out loud. Throughout my youth I had listened, day after day, to a single lament from my father: why hadn't the — arrived from Bedford yet? The — was some spare part or other needed for the completion of a job in the garage [...]. Day in, day out, lunchtimes and teatimes, my father would ritually butter his bread whilst intoning his litany of frustrations, this job held up, that job pushed aside, because the distributors hadn't delivered such-and-such a spare part. [...]. The customers complained and got angry, jobs drifted on for days, sometimes weeks, and my father drifted into migraine and depression.
> So, the Bernoulli meter was the condensation of a thousand spare parts spread over a decade and a half which had worn my father down with their delays and confusions. (55-56)

The above excerpt offers an instance of White dissecting the significance of his own fiction and sharing his findings with the reader.[23] At the same time it suggests that by filling in the gaps, a fictional text can help the subject write a coherent narrative of his life and understand

[23] White might thus be said to indulge in what he calls (in *The Uses of Obscurity—The Fiction of Early Modernism)* "symptomatic reading" (4). White writes, "The kind of knowledge in question is what I have called, following Althusser, 'symptomatic reading'. At its crudest and most general, symptomatic reading treats a literary utterance as a surface sign of something that could not be said directly" (4).

what it was that shaped his sense of self.[24] Anne Hunsaker Hawkins has argued that one of the driving forces behind "pathography," which she defines as a life narrative dealing with death and disease (1), is the desire to reestablish some kind of order in one's life (18).[25] In *Reconstructing Illness—Studies in Pathography,* Hawkins posits that by putting experiences to paper, one's past life is given a pattern, thus acquiring significance:

> [...] the act of committing experience to narrative form inevitably confers upon it a particular sequence of events and endows it with a significance that was probably only latent in the original experience. Narrative form alters experience, giving it a definite shape, organizing events into a beginning, a middle, and an end, and adding drama—heightening feelings and seeing the individuals involved as characters in a therapeutic plot. Writing about an experience—any experience—inevitably changes it. [...]. The past, then, is not simply recorded in the autobiographical act but given a structure, a coherence, a meaning. Thus the process of autobiographical recollection is part self-discovery and part self-creation. (14-15)

The point Hawkins is making is not only that writing about the past confers meaning but also that it helps the subject to understand who he or she is. The question we need to ask, of course, is whether this is also true for Allon White. What we need to consider, in other words, is whether, by writing his autobiographical fragment and intertwining it with fiction, White manages to get to the bottom of his malaise and to acquire self-understanding. Considering that White never overtly addresses the detached relationship he has with his mother, this does not seem to be the case. To be sure, though White might believe moving between fact and fiction has allowed him to uncover hidden memories, I have argued that these secrets are, in fact, not secrets precisely because they are revealed. Thus, while it is true that White comes to a better understanding of the motivation behind his novel by writing his life story, the inverse is not true for his autobiographical fragment. Put another way, while his memoir helps him fill in the gaps of the novel and lets him see that the story was fueled by the guilt he felt over his sister's death, the novel does not help him fill in (or even see) the gaps of the memoir.

That White cannot identify the lacunae in his life by analysing the fictional tale in relation to his autobiography alone brings me back to an earlier point, namely that the writer needs the reader to help him uncover that which he avoids writing about, i.e. to identify that which he has repressed. He needs the reader to boot to see that including his fictional tale is not so much a means of dissecting his feelings of guilt but a ruse to talk about those things that are exactly *not* at the bottom of his unease. What this means for the life writing genre as a whole is that the autobiographical text on its own is not (always) enough to allow the subject to identify the source of his unease. In short, while the text is undoubtedly important in the fact-

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[24] This is reminiscent of what White identifies as happening in *Bleak House*. In his essay on Dickens's novel he postulates, "knowledge in *Bleak House* is a systematic tracking-down of concealed truth, of a reality which already exists in secret scraps and fragments and which true connection will restore to wholeness" (109-110).

[25] On the recent proliferation of life writing dealing with death and disease, Tom Ratekin points out that "Although many artists have written under the burden of terminal disease [...] never before has such candor emerged in speaking of illness [...]. In addition to creating works of art that include terminal illness as a subject, many artists have written autobiographical pieces describing their own particular experience of disease" (1-2).

finding process, the assistance of a third party is essential in identifying the life writer's blind spots.

The levels

Allon White uses his life narrative to comment (covertly, perhaps) on the exilic nature of the autobiographical genre: he intimates that as the fluidity of autobiography's borders allows him to include parts of a novel in his life narrative it might help him see the relation between past events and personal feelings of loss.[26] Irrespective of whether or not he succeeds, by virtue of the fact that he explicitly points it out, including fiction in autobiography takes on a different dimension in *Too Close to the Bone* than in the texts hitherto looked at. This, however, does not mean that these narratives have little in common. On the contrary, as White's memoir appropriates the autobiographical genre in such a way that it conveys the narrator's feelings of exile and unease, it relates very closely to experimental work done in the field by Anne Michaels and Frank McCourt, as will presently become apparent.

White arrogates the autobiographical genre in different ways to bring across his sense of isolation. For the sake of clarity, these may be divided into two subsections, the first concerning the conflation of fact and fiction, and the latter the appropriation of literary devices including plot and time. While the co-occurrence of fact and fiction was addressed in the preceding section, the focus was on the way in which these two modes reflect on each other in terms of content, and the extent to which their interaction helps the autobiographer fill in the gaps in his life story. What I want to concentrate on next is how they interact on the level of structure and form, and how this underscores issues pertaining to displacement and malaise.

Because White's autobiographical text includes parts of a novel, one might say that fiction is embedded in memoir. But considering previous findings (that the novel is premised on White's life and on his past experiences), one might also postulate that hidden inside his fiction is an account of his childhood. Since fact and fiction are mutually embedded, there is a sense not only that something is concealed within something else, but also that whatever is hidden needs to be uncovered. The circumstance of different stories being enclosed in one another, and of the necessity of extracting the underlying story from the surface story, is analogous to what I have argued for the psyche of the subject. For just like White tries to disinter memories stowed away in the unconscious, we as readers are (or should be) at pains to exhume the actual narrative from the surface story. Thus we can argue that the structure of the text—concealing one story inside another—reflects and reinforces the notion that secrets are locked in the unconscious and that they need to be brought to light.

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[26] Concerning innovative approaches to autobiography dealing with trauma, Leigh Gilmore has argued that "Although those who can tell their stories benefit from the therapeutic balm of words, the path to this achievement is strewn with obstacles. To navigate it, some writers move away from recognizably autobiographical forms even as they engage autobiography's central questions" (*The Limits of Autobiography* 7).

Earlier I claimed that analogies can be made between White's work and the two texts looked at in foregoing chapters. While concealing one genre type inside another is, admittedly, not a trait that all three stories share, what they *do* have in common is the fact that each creates a murky interface between biographical fact and novelistic fiction, and that this is unsettling to the reader. However, the ways in which they appropriate autobiography to blur generic boundaries are not quite the same. While *Angela's Ashes*, for instance, presents memoir in novelistic vein and plays with autobiographical conventions, *Fugitive Pieces* as fictional memoir raises theoretical questions as to what is real and what invented and all but eradicates the difference between factual and fictitious narrative. *Too Close to the Bone* again presents a different approach, and the autobiographical and the make-believe are made to commingle on not one but on a number of levels. That is to say, besides embedding fact in fiction and fiction in fact in the text as a whole, each of the constituting parts—the biographical narrative and the novel—blurs the boundaries between the real and the fictitious on their own terms and in their own right. In consequence of this multiple overlapping and crisscrossing of genre borders, the reader is left disconcerted, and in this way given a sense of the unease White himself is experiencing.

The interaction between fact and fantasy, then, is far more layered and complicated than including parts of fiction in the autobiography. As intimated above, each of the text's underlying levels (the fictional tale and the factual account of the narrator's life) individually transgresses the fact/fiction divide. The novel, for instance, traverses the boundaries between the real and the invented by dint of authorial intrusion. Because the autobiographical narrator intrudes into the novelistic text, fact and fiction are fused and the reader left wavering between what is real and what is imagined. One of the ways in which the writer enters the fictional domain, thereby destroying the text's mimetic illusion, is by highlighting the tricks and tools of fiction writing. He points out that the story is of his creation and concomitantly relays the gist of the narrative by quoting parts of the novel verbatim as well as by providing us with a summary of the plot. What is more, we find him commenting on his writing and giving us insight into his thinking, as when he sets out the contrast between the two protagonists in *Gifts*:

> Indeed, in retrospect, I am astonished at the political symmetry and opposition of these two men [...]. And what a gulf of time and space I put between Nicodemus the visionary anarchist and Lucas Arnow the progressive rationalist. Three centuries of history and half the length of Europe. This was not a consciously planned or controlled decision, and if I can discover now the links and distance between the two halves of this schizoid fiction then I think I shall have learned something important. (31-32)

By thus remarking on a work he created, the writer draws our attention to the fictionality of the text and simultaneously reminds us of the fact that he is in control. To be sure, the extent of White's authorial power is such that it allows him to retrospectively change his mind about a character. He tells us for instance that he has deliberately spruced up the

character of Lucas Arnow for the sake of reappearing in his autobiography and that he has made him more suitable to his writerly purposes:

> I must confess that there was little more to Lucas Arnow than this, and he appears a little small and dry when set beside the fanaticism and inner visionary power of Nicodemus. When I think of Lucas Arnow I see a worthy and anxious man with little humour and even less authority. Even now, by quoting Benjamin and so forth above, I have endowed him with more passion and cosmic vision than he had in the original fiction eleven years ago. (31)

White's literary control is further evinced when the first-person narrator of the autobiography at one point in the narrative usurps the third-person omniscient narrator of the novel. This intervention is signalled by first using a smaller font size to indicate that he is quoting directly from the novel, and then by changing these very events in the present. The part cited from the fiction deals with Lucas Arnow's final moments. Here we are told that Lucas is aware of "a rush of pure sound through the air like a wind becoming louder and louder" and that "A gleeful confusion of bugs and babble tumbled and fell upon him like insects swarming in the darkness" (34). But as the quote ends and we return to the concrete world, we read the following amendment to the fictional tale:

> But Lucas does hear something just before he dies. Across the empty water of the bay a young boy and his father are fishing from a boat anchored near the shore. The young boy is trailing a line from the stern of the small boat and their voices carry clearly across the surface of the waters. As Lucas dies, there is a sudden disturbance and a splash which Lucas hears like an echo from far off. The last thing that Lucas hears, *clearly now*, with a preternatural clarity, is the excited voice of the young boy in the darkness. 'Look Papa. Look. Look. A fish. I've caught a fish.' (34, my emphasis)

Not happy with the way the protagonist dies, the autobiographical narrator changes the events of the novel. He moreover makes not only Lucas hear a voice of hope and redemption before he breathes his last but also intimates that he, in the present and "clearly now" (34), can hear it himself.[27] This means that while the actual world insinuates itself into the realm of fiction, fiction—re-appropriated and rewritten—finds its way into the real world and into the life of the flesh-and-blood writer. Since the concrete and imaginary world are conflated to such an extent that they intrude on each other, and since characters and events are changed at will, we as readers begin to suspect that the narrator cannot be relied upon. Consequently we cannot but begin to wonder about the truth value of the autobiographical text. These

[27] Given my contention that it is White's mother who is the absent figure in this narrative, it is not without significance that the only consolation Lucas Arnow gets on his deathbed is "the excited voice of the young boy" (34) telling his father—and not his mother—that he has reeled in a fish.

misgivings are heightened by White himself; he informs us that what we are reading is an "unconventional biography" (28) and warns us not to take the text at face value:[28]

> I suppose this is my biography, my life. Fragments of memory. Perhaps even a memorial. Except that I don't believe in biographies and advise you to be especially sceptical about this one, written, one has to say, under the stress of illness and in extreme haste. Self-perception is distorted enough in the healthy, God knows what it is like in those gripped by terminal illness. (26)

White's text features a multitude of border crossings between fact and fiction: over and above embedding fictional prose in memoir, the author's hand in the make-believe world is brought to the fore, and the actual events of the past declared to be partly conjectured or misconstrued. The upshot of being presented with a self-aware narrative on the one hand and an imprecise autobiographical account on the other is that we as readers are unsure what to make of the text. How much of what we read, we ask ourselves, is accurate and how much of it has been contorted? What exactly has been added to the original happenings, and how have memories and events been moulded by illness and hindsight? What, in short, is fact and what fiction? Left wavering between the actual and fabricated world without any narrator we can trust—so the suggestion here—we of necessity feel discomposed, and in this way we are made to experience the narrator's own sense of displacement and unease.[29]

Too Close to the Bone manages to unsettle the reader, thereby involving him or her in the autobiographer's life story. In a neat ploy, our investment in the events is further augmented by the narrator directly soliciting our help when he says "I will tell you about [my] novel and you will have to see what you think" (27). Much like Ben in the previous chapter, White, then, suggests a type of talking cure to help him deal with past events. But whereas a fictional character (Jakob) was Ben's analyst, in White's case it is the implied reader who becomes "the subject supposed to know."[30] As far back as 1982, Albert E. Stone suggested that in order to recover and reconstitute the autobiographer's past, the reader should be immersed in his or her experiences. He posited that, with autobiography, "Writer and readers tacitly

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[28] White is not alone in his anxiety that he will not be able to give an accurate account of past events. Sharon Butala for one has maintained that "The memoirist's quandary includes the discovery of all the many selves, all the many possibilities of stories, from which one has to choose. Life is just too large, too multifarious, too huge and too intricate to ever put it all in a book […]" (49). Returning to *Too Close to the Bone*, Tom Ratekin believes that White "prefers the term *biography* to the more common *autobiography*, thereby distancing the author from his subject, and this warning to the reader provides him with the freedom to write whatever comes" (33, italics original).

[29] In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon explains "the hostile response of some critics to the mixing of historical and fictive representation in historiographic metafiction" by positing that "It is not that the fact of the mixing is new […]. The problem seems to reside in its manner, in the self-consciousness of the fictionality, the lack of the familiar pretence of transparency, and the calling into question of the factual grounding of history-writing" (33). With this in mind, I want to argue that *Too Close to the Bone* upsets and disconcerts not only because it mixes autobiographical fact and fictional narrative, but also because it is fully aware of what it is doing.

[30] The reference here is to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and to the way it sees the relation between the analyst and the analysand. As Slavoj Žižek notes, "Lacan began with the notion of the analyst as the 'subject supposed to know,' which arises through transference (the analyst is the one supposed to know the meaning of the patient's symptoms)" (538). As we have seen, in the end it is the reader who is in a position "to know the meaning of the patient's symptoms" (538) and to conclude that it is White's mother who is the repressed figure behind the narrative.

conspire to reenter, revivify, and finally understand a singular past which has been consciously remembered and less consciously revised or 'forgotten'"(4). Literally charged with helping the narrator come to terms with the events of his youth, the reader certainly reenters Allon White's past when he or she takes up *Too Close to the Bone*. By moreover being confronted with a text that blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, we are made to share not only in White's life story but also in his malaise. Therefore, while affectively involving us in the text does create sympathy for the narrator-protagonist, it also makes us feel unsettled and saddled with responsibility. In short, it underscores the uneasiness we already have about the truth value of the text and gives us an inkling of White's own agonised state of mind.

Fragmentation

Going back to an earlier contention, there is another technique besides asking for help or conflating fact and fiction which White employs in order to let us partake in his malaise and in order to convey his sense of being out of place, namely the way in which he implements narrative elements. In what follows I accordingly focus on the appropriation of literary devices. I pay foremost attention to the element of plot, and argue that the fluidity of the autobiographical genre allows White to endow the text with a fragmented structure. Finally I claim that, as a result, the memoir suggests White's sense of incompletion, and consequently helps bring across his internal unease and self-estrangement.

In the previous section it was pointed out that two narratives (one biographical and one fictitious) are interwoven in the memoir. Having two stories interspersed in this way, the plot will of necessity be disjunct. However, by virtue of the fact that the novel and memoir are individually as fragmented as the text collectively, *Too Close to the Bone* can be said to be disjointed in various instances and on different planes. To start with the parts pertaining to his life story, White clearly indicates in his subtitle that what he has given us are "*Fragments* of an Autobiography" (my emphasis). More than signalling the fact that the text is not a full-length autobiographical work, the subtitle suggests its bitty nature. That is to say, it intimates the way in which White's remembrance of the past is divided into sections such as "Ken," "The Village," or "Great-Grandma and the Well" and that these are strewn throughout the narrative. "Fragments of an Autobiography" then brings to the fore that we are dealing with a disunited text, not only on account of its being presented alongside fiction but also because it is separated into shorter segments and not organised as a coherent whole.

Textual fragmentation is equally apparent in the fictional tale. Analogous to the notion that we are dealing with a reduced autobiography, the novel is not given in full but only parts of it are relayed to the reader. This abridged and thus incomplete version of the story is not arranged into a meaningful whole but comprises dispersed pieces of information that either summarise or quote from the original novel. The parts of the tale that have been selected for the autobiographical essay are, then, not sequentially arranged but scattered over the pages

and interspersed with White's remembering the past. Significantly, besides being manifest in the disjointed layout, fragmentation is also evident in the novel's content. From the start it is foregrounded that *Gifts* consists of two stories, each featuring its own protagonist. Further these stories are so disparate that the writer himself remarks that they have very little in common and that they do not seem related in any way. He tells us that "The plot was a double-braid" (27) and that there was "a gulf of time and space" (32) between the two main characters. He also indicates that he has always found this disconnectedness and incoherence greatly upsetting:

> Certainly, at the time, the two halves of the novel would not coalesce. They remained obdurately separate and opposed. It was the failure to integrate the two stories satisfactorily into one fiction which eventually prevented me from finishing it. Written in such rhapsodic haste, it just stayed as it was, resistant to any attempt at revision. Its incompleteness has haunted me ever since. (32)

By virtue of autobiography's shifty nature, White is able to patch together a life narrative from (f)actual as well as fictitious sections. The resulting disunited structure is then underscored by endowing each of the underlying parts with their own fragmented quality. Therefore, E. Ann Kaplan is mistaken when she compares the writing of Sarah Kofman to that of Allon White's and argues that they are "writing at a moment of sudden lucidity about the trauma that has marked [their] life" (59) so that, in contrast to texts like Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, theirs are precisely *not* "[marked by] fragmented thinking, the moving backwards and forwards, the repetitions, the doubts about what [the writer] is doing" (59). In fact, not only is fragmentation and disjointedness a *fait accompli* and, to White personally, a source of concern, but it is the contention here that being incoherent and incomplete is an integral part of the text(s).[31] Indeed, keeping in mind the different ways in which White is alienated from his self, I want to argue that the broken-up structure of the narrative mirrors the subject's sense of lacking completion, and that it is exactly the gaps and inconsistencies which are necessary to intimate and imitate his inner fragmentation.[32]

"Différance as temporization"[33]

Above I argued that the subject's inner turmoil is mirrored in the structure of the text. In this section I look at how the structure moreover enables the implementation of a related disruptive literary technique, namely non-chronological time. As such, I explore the ways in which White, in similar vein to Michaels and McCourt, uses time to underscore the disjointed

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[31] In light of this statement, Janet Varner Gunn seems astute in her assertion that "Like texts that resist as well as provoke interpretation, the lived past, too, resists total interpretive possession [...]. Autobiography completes no pictures. Instead, it rejects wholeness or harmony [...] as a false unity which serves no more than a defense against the self's deeper knowledge of its finitude" (25).

[32] By so doing, *Too Close to the Bone* can be said to hark back to "twentieth century self-reflexive works [...] whose subjects are represented in fragmented discursive forms that seek by their fragmentation to mirror what modern criticism has come to call [...] 'the divided self'" (Jay 36).

[33] Jacques Derrida, "Différance" (9)

nature of the text and, by extension, the self. While I accordingly take cognisance of the fact that implementing non-linear time to bring across displacement is not unique to White's narrative, I also posit that he uses time in a way not yet encountered in this thesis and argue that he wields it for the purposes of circumventing the truth.

Either part of White's narrative (i.e. the biographical account of his life as well as the fictional tale) features an erratic chronology. The events of the novel, for instance, do not appear in White's memoir as they do in his fiction. Instead, only parts of the story are relayed and these are found dispersed throughout the autobiography and in a new sequence. Not that we are in a very good position to judge the original order; we are never told exactly how much of the novel has been omitted or how much narrative time we have lost. This means that the story's timeline is disjunct on two different accounts, for besides the fact that events are handpicked and non-sequentially ordered, it creates gaps and spaces in time which we as readers have no means of filling in.

The confusion and uncertainty created by the nonlinearity of the fictional tale is exacerbated by the way in which the biographical events are sequenced. Here events are jumbled, and the past and the present conflated so that story-time and text-time do not correspond. To illustrate, the work starts off with a brief outline of the author's present predicament and then moves into a lengthy description of a novel he wrote many years before. Only after seven pages or so of synopsis does the narrative return to details about White's life—this time, however, we are not back in the present where we started but are told about his childhood. Since the writer, then, is not bound by chronological time he is at liberty to jumble the present and the past as he sees fit, and to include different past events at any temporal stage of the narrative.

Jumping around between the present and the past, as well as between different events in the past, is sustained throughout the text. Further the past and the present are at times made to overlap. A case in point is the afternoon previously referred to when young Allon is drawn to the waterbutt at the garden's end. It might be remembered that as he recollects staring into the dark and mouldy water, the narrator says that "even now" (41)—i.e. in the present—the water in the tank has the power to hold him spellbound. This means that events that took place in the past are allowed to encroach on the present, and that then and now become one. What is more, the fictional past and the actual present occasionally intermingle. As remarked before, when White revisits the section in the novel where Lucas Arnow dies, he hears in the present and actual world, "clearly now, with a preternatural clarity" (34), the same sounds that Arnow hears before he passes. In this way fact is conjoined with fiction, and the past conflated with the present, all at the same time.

To bring the above points together, it can be said that time in *Too Close to the Bone* is all but linear, for not only is the original order of the fictional events changed and/or omitted, but in the autobiographical piece as a whole the present is made to alternate and overlap with

the actual as well as the fictional past.[34] Because chronological time is not heeded, we as readers are occasioned to figure out the linear succession of events and infer the work's *fabula* ourselves.[35] Rearranging events and bending time back on itself pushes the reader of his or her comfort zone and hence has an unsettling effect. Yet far from detracting from the work, the unease created by an incomplete and non-chronological timeline suggests White's own malaise, and in so doing supports the claim that the exilic nature of the autobiographical genre lends itself to conveying feelings related to isolation and loss.

Admittedly, using muddled timelines to bring across unease and ensure reader involvement has been looked at before. However, there is more to Allon White's implementation of time than using an incoherent chronology to mirror the subject's sense of dislocation. The way in which time is manipulated in *Too Close to the Bone* is also indicative of White's discomfort with facing the truth and, with that, his desire to defer and delay. Timelines, as I will show, suggest uneasiness not only by leaving it up to the reader to separate the past from the present, and fact from fiction, but also by intimating the protagonist's need to postpone talking about that which is at the heart of his unease.

In order to explore how the manipulation of narrative time might bring across the need to delay, a brief recapitulation of Jacques Derrida's "Différance" and his understanding of deferral will be informative. In his well-known paper, Derrida coins the concept *différance*, which he describes as a "sheath" (3) binding together different ideas. He posits that the unique feature of *différance* is that it at once refers to both meanings of the French verb *différer*, and that it implies difference as well as postponement (7-8). Because it simultaneously invokes difference and deferral, the concept is believed to embody the way in which language works (7-14). While Derrida goes on to make it bear on a number of things, it is the concept of "*Différance* as temporization" (9) that will be of interest here. It is, in other words, the notion that "the circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself" (9) which will be brought in relation to Allon White and to the way in which he delays the moment "the thing itself" (9) is faced.

That the writer is able to defer facing that which is at the heart of his unease is thanks to the shiftiness of the autobiographical genre on the one hand, and to the temporal structure of the text on the other. To specify, because autobiography allows for the oscillation between the present and the past (whether fictional or real), White is able to manipulate time and postpone writing about certain key moments in his life, most notably about what happened between him and his mother. Previously it was pointed out that White sidelines his mother by amongst others referring to his parents in the plural, mentioning her incidentally, embedding her in another story (as when he talks about the village women), or by omitting

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[34] According to Tom Ratekin, "a common trait within terminal illness memoirs is the loss of interest in beginnings, endings, and the linear life plot" (3-4).

[35] In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks reminds us of the fact that "a distinction urged by the Russian Formalists [is] that between *fabula* and *sjŭzet*. *Fabula* is defined as the order of events referred to by the narrative, whereas *sjŭzet* is the order of events presented in the narrative discourse" (12).

her altogether (as when he neglects to talk about the relationship they had after he contracted leukemia). To this list one can add manipulating narrative time. A case in point is when, at the beginning of the text, White instructs the reader to help him pinpoint that which has plagued him all his life. By subsequently plunging into a detailed account of his novel, however, White manages to replace real time with fictional time and consequently to defer talking about what it is that lies at the bottom of his unease.

That the author procrastinates when it comes to talking about his mother is arguably best illustrated in "Great-Grandma and the Well," in which White goes into a detailed discussion of his ancestors. Talking about his female lineage, the narrator says that the reason why the White women have traditionally been more aware of status than the men "is [partly] because they have come into the village from outside" (47). But while he then goes on to say, "my mother's story is an extreme case of this which I shall come to presently" (47), he never fulfils his promise. Instead, he tells us how his grandfather had hooked up with a woman of higher social standing before launching into an account of how he inherited his great-grandfather's name and of how he was supposed to take over the business from his father one day.

White uses narrative time to postpone coming face to face with what Derrida refers to as "the thing itself" (9). By constantly deferring, he never gets round to talking about the relationship he has with his mother or about why it might be strained. Thus he never gets to deal with that which is at the bottom of his displacement. Naturally, this is a dangerous situation to be in, especially in view of the fact that he has set himself the task of locating the reason for his unease before time runs out and he dies. It is therefore the way it all ends—both in terms of the narrative and White's life—to which I turn in what follows.

The end

By constantly deferring an encounter with that which he has been repressing, Allon White equips himself with the means to keep the unconscious at bay and to distance himself from the truth. Of his proclivity to delay and of the dangers associated with procrastinating, the writer seems to be well aware; he posits that because he has held back, death might catch up with him before he gets to write all he needs to:

> Of course I've waited too long before writing this and now it is late, probably too late. Like beginning to write at twilight with no lamp as the darkness falls. And there is no light now. (26)

White thus fears that he has delayed writing so long that he might die before he is able to access "a central knot of [his] life" (27) and successfully deal with feelings of alienation. At the same time, however, he also seems to be saying the obverse, i.e. that deferral is the only way in which he *can* sort out his feelings and fully come to grasp the reasons for his uneasiness. As intimated before, he believes that it is only by moving back and forth in time—and thus by postponing the completion of his life narrative—that he will be able to gradually

gain some self-understanding. Concomitantly he asserts he will only conclude his autobiographical fragment once he has obtained adequate knowledge of his self, that is, once he comprehends exactly why he has always felt out of place and ill at ease. Because achieving self-knowledge is so important, he proclaims that he cannot allow himself to die before he gets round to finishing his life story; he tells us, "It also helps to keep me alive, like refusing to die because I haven't heard the end of the story. My Scheherezade" (35).

White's memoir, then, suggests that only once he has made enough of a detour to fully comprehend the reasons for his malaise will he be in a position to finish writing his memoir. But getting to the end of his life story, according to the author, will also mean getting to the end of his life. The question, at the risk of sounding callous, is *which comes first?* Does White, in other words, ever get to the point where he gains so much insight that he can finally finish the narrative and lay down his head to die, or does death overtake him before he writes the ending? In order to explore these questions, a brief outline of the last few pages seems unavoidable. In this respect it might be recalled that the very last section of the autobiography, "The Bernoulli Meter," depicts Lucas Arnow's dying moments and his hope that a piece of equipment will arrive soon. The importance of the meter in the fiction is subsequently explored, and it is postulated that the episode signifies the way White's father used to wait impatiently for mechanical components to come from Bedford. Because he did not want to be subjected to "the same helplessness and frustration" (56) as his father, White tells us he became resolute in his decision to break with the firm. This in turn serves as a catalyst for his father to look for someone to fill his role, and to offer Jo the Italian a partnership in the business. What has not been mentioned so far is that the partnership gradually goes sour as Jo starts to use Allon White & Son to carry out informal and illegal trading activities. Hence it increasingly happens that instead of money, the Whites are compensated with bottles of wine, cans of tomato puree, and other commodities. In the end, this "exchange-and-favour system of Southern Italy" (57) resulted in the partnership breaking up, as we are informed in the last two paragraphs of the text:

> 'Mozzarella,' my father would moan into his dinner plate at night. 'We haven't got any,' replied mother. 'Haven't we though,' said my father. 'Haven't we though.'
> The partnership was dissolved amicably and Jo went back to Naples to set up his own garage there. He returned to Bedford a few years later having been driven out of Italy, so he said, by violent demands and extortion. 'Perhaps the mozzarella was a blessing,' murmured my father. (58)

The reason for citing the above excerpt is to help us ascertain whether White consciously chooses to conclude the story in this way, or whether he dies before he gets round to finishing it. The fact that the ending is ostensibly abrupt certainly complicates matters, and there is little to suggest whether this was deliberate or whether the author had intended to add more text. So, presuming that no paratextual reference or extraneous information is taken into account, it does not appear that we will ever be able to tell whether or not the ending was

calculated.[36] Thus it seems astute to change tack and look at what we can say about the ending *as it stands*. Instead of wondering whether White's life ended before he could end the narrative, in other words, what we should do is ask how we can bring the final pages into relation with issues addressed in the text, and especially with those pertaining to exile and unease.

Let us, then, return to the concluding paragraphs, and see how it might help explain White's sense of displacement and malaise. On the level of content, these passages might be understood as indicating his father's relief that Jo started trading heavily in commodities such as mozzarella so that he had no choice but to break off their relationship. Such a reading would mean Allon White Sr. sees it as his good fortune that his son's "substitute" (57) has been got rid of and, concomitantly, that his son is happy about the fact that he has not been successfully replaced. Such a reading would not only reinforce the attention paid to the relationship between White and his father but, by virtue of its very absence, also shed light on the way he feels about his mother. For though she is mentioned here, no information is given about the relationship between Mrs White and her son, and she is once again peripheral to the anecdote.

In addition to being spatially marginalised, White's mother is grammatically reduced. To specify, while she is adorned with a possessive adjective (be it "my" or "your") all the other times she is mentioned (40, 42, 47, 51, 52), the last time she makes an appearance in the narrative she is reduced to simply "mother" (58). By nominally curtailing his mother, White not only makes her seem more like a character in a story than a flesh-and-blood person, but he also manages to focus us in on the alienation between them. That is to say, by moving from "my mother" to simply "mother" White intimates that there is a distance between them and that this might very well be the cause of his malaise.

But it is not only *what* White writes that allows him to foreground his exile and unease in the final paragraphs. To be sure, they also *structurally* bear on his sense of displacement. To argue the point, the discussion on the fragmented nature of the text and how it brings across White's sense of incompletion needs to be recalled. At the same time, cognisance should be taken of the manifestly sudden and abrupt way in which the narrative concludes. Bearing these two things in mind, I want to claim that it is only appropriate that a fragmented narrative such as *Too Close to the Bone* has a blunt ending. Thus, much like the pieces of a broken mirror are of necessity sharp and jagged, having a blunt ending is perfectly in keeping with a disjointed text such as White's. This not only because it underscores the fragmented structure of the memoir as a whole but also because it reinforces the protagonist's sense of incompletion and lack.

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[36] The type of extratextual detail referred to might include the information John Barrell provides in *London Review of Books*. According to Barrell, White died before he could finish his autobiography; he writes, "before [Allon White] died, he had the strength to add only a few more pages of the hundreds, almost already written, that he could see stretched out like a fast road in front of him" (21).

It is interesting to note that White, judging by what he writes elsewhere, must have given some thought to abrupt and dissonant endings.[37] To return a final time to his paper on *Bleak House*, White remarks that on the very last couple of pages of the novel, Dickens brings yet another character into the story, "Caddy Jellyby's little baby girl, born deaf and dumb" (106). He then goes on to hypothesize why Dickens might have included "a single nasty discord in what is otherwise a bland and comfortable rounding-off of the narrative" (106):

> The deaf and dumb girl could have been meant as a small touch of dissonant naturalism introduced by Dickens to shake the predictable complacency of the happy ending, or it could have been a final touch of pathos [...] or even a simple device for emphasizing the saintly qualities of Caddy [...] (106)

White, then, postulates that Dickens chooses to end his novel in a way that seems discordant with the rest of the text, either in order to stress Caddy's virtues, or to generate affect, or to make the end less predictable and in this way to disconcert the reader. What this suggests is that the ending is made deliberately blunt precisely in order to involve the reader —whether that be achieved by producing pathos or by creating dissonance and unease. Significantly, this seems to be exactly what White manages with his own ending; that is to say, because *Too Close to the Bone* concludes so abruptly, it jolts us out of our complacency and involves us, one final time, in the writer's life (story). Consequently, it makes us sit up and pay attention to the significance of the concluding paragraphs. As such, it lets us recall how White repeatedly sidelines his mother in his memoir. It makes us remember the tactics he employs to defer talking about their relationship, and impresses upon us anew his sense of alienation and unease.

Reflection

In the face of death, Allon White writes an autobiographical fragment. Through this exercise, he tells us, he hopes to get to the core of his discontent. But writing, as we have seen, is not always enough to un-puzzle the past. For while it allows White to pinpoint a guilty conscience, there are intimations that there are also other, more deep-rooted reasons for his displacement. This does not mean that the autobiographical text cannot shed light on why the writer might feel ill at ease and out of place. On the contrary, by taking note of the gaps and absences in the memoir we are able to get closer to the truth and to infer that it is the detached relationship with his mother that lies at the bottom of White's malaise. The material point is that this type of insight can only be achieved by noticing lacunae in the text, and only with help from the outside. Thus it appears that there are occasions when the life writer

[37] It is worth observing that White's own novel, *Gifts*, does not feature any ending at all. The reason he cites for not completing it is that "at the time, the two halves of the novel would not coalesce" (32). Further he avows that "Its incompleteness has haunted me ever since" (32), and expresses the hope that "Perhaps now, as I go on, I shall be able to finish with it. Finally" (32).

cannot undo a "central knot of [his] life and unconscious world" (27) by writing alone, but when he needs the reader to engage with the text.

In the chapters on *Angela's Ashes* and *Fugitive Pieces* it was argued that the autobiographical text acts as a go-between to relay the subject's sense of exile to the reader. In such cases, the reader is a passive participant and the recipient of that which the writer is at liberty to bring across by means of his or her narrative. While in *Too Close to the Bone* the subject's feelings of isolation are similarly conveyed to the reader through the text, there is something more at stake here. Indeed, by virtue of the fact that the reader is required to notice absences which the autobiographer cannot, he or she becomes an *active* participant in the communication chain. This means that the autobiographical triad consisting of the writer, the reader and the text is enhanced, for not only do readers share in the subject's sense of displacement and malaise, but they also help him to understand what it is in his life that might have led to these feelings in the first place.

What all of this means on a larger scale is that a new understanding of autobiography is starting to unfold, for communication is no longer seen as flowing only in one direction. To elucidate: a life narrative which "merely" conveys the writer's sense of exile to the reader suggests that as far as autobiography is concerned, communication is a one-way process (from the writer via the text to the reader). However, when a narrative such as *Too Close to the Bone* requires the reader to interact with the text so that they can help the writer identify that which he or she cannot, communication also starts to go in the *opposite* direction (from the reader to the text). Of course, this two-way type of communication cannot be completed—while the reader comes to new insights owing to the information received via the chain of communication, and while he or she can project this back on to the text, the last link in the communication chain (from the text to the author) cannot be made, so that recently arrived at conclusions cannot be imparted to the writer. In instances such as these, autobiography is a genre in exile not only because of its fluid borders and shifty nature but also because it invites the participation of the reader without being able to let information flow back to the writer. In terms of the two way communication model, then, the text can be seen as locked in a state of limbo somewhere between the reader and the autobiographer.

In light of the above observations, White appears to have been astute in sensing that he created something remarkable in his "unconventional biography" (28)—regardless of whether or not this was his intended meaning. In the next chapter I resume my exploration of turn-of-the-century writers who experimented with the exilic nature of the autobiographical genre in order to involve the reader and bring across their experiences of dislocation. Contrary to prior chapters, however, I leave behind the twentieth century and turn my attention to work done by Doris Lessing in the late noughties. In immersing myself in *Alfred and Emily*, I foremost focus on narrative peculiarities that distinguish Lessing's text from those hitherto look at. En route to ascertaining how the autobiographical genre is adopted and made her own, I nonetheless pick up on issues dealt with before. Consequently,

I address the damage illness, war and bad parenting can do, and recall how living with their legacy means becoming alienated from one's self and one's surroundings. At the same time, I argue that Lessing uses the shifty nature of autobiography to such effect that the reader, in direct contrast to White's narrative, is deliberately blinded so that he or she will precisely *not* see the gaps in the text. There thus being analogies to be made as well as dissimilarities to be identified, *Alfred and Emily* is not only well placed to analyse innovative and experimental autobiographical work produced around the start of the new century, but also particularly instrumental in supporting the claim that life writing during this period increasingly becomes a genre in exile.

Chapter 4

Doris Lessing: Sensation junkie, Storyteller, Author of *Alfred & Emily*

> The storyteller is deep inside everyone of us. The story-maker is always with us. Let us suppose our world is attacked by war [...]. Let us suppose floods wash through our cities, the seas rise ... but the storyteller will be there, for it is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, create us—for good and for ill. It is our stories that will recreate us, when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed. It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the myth-maker, that is our phoenix, that represents us at our best, and at our most creative.
>
> —Doris Lessing, "On not winning the Nobel Prize"

In the foreword to *Alfred and Emily*, Doris Lessing declares that she has gone back in time in order to give her parents a different past to the one they had. The first half of her bipartite text accordingly tells the fictional biography of her father and mother, Alfred Tayler and Emily McVeagh. Set in England in the first part of the twentieth century, the "novella" (1) begins on the day her parents meet. It then goes on to trace the ups and downs of their young adult lives and ends with an epilogue informing us about the circumstances surrounding their death. The second section of the book, "Alfred and Emily; Two Lives" (149) sees a break with fiction and features a number of short autobiographical sketches on Lessing's own life. The focus here, however, remains her parents in so far as the text relates some of her experiences of growing up in Southern Rhodesia,[1] and deals with the troubled relations she has with her mother and father respectively.

In this latter part, as in the preface, Lessing expounds on the reasons for including a fictional biography of her parents in her life narrative. She starts off by asserting that her mother and father had their hopes destroyed by the First World War and claims that this affected them in equal measure. As the war not only altered their lives but also their persons, it follows that who her parents fundamentally were is not to be found in the individuals Lessing grew up with but, instead, in the young Alfred and Emily who lived in pre-war Britain. It is, then, in order to convey the bona fide Alfred and Emily that Lessing says she

[1] Lessing consistently refers to the country of her youth as Southern Rhodesia, as Zimbabwe was known when it was her abode (1925-1949).

has written a fictional tale about her mother and father; she tells us "I have tried to give them lives as might have been if there had been no World War One" (vii).

But writing a make-believe story about the intrinsic Alfred and Emily and conjecturing what their existence could have been like in a world untouched by war are not the only reasons given for compiling the memoir. Indeed, Lessing makes it very clear that she also writes about the past by virtue of the fact that the war adversely affected her *own* life. To specify: because her father never stops speaking about WWI but also because she is locked in combat with the woman her mother evolved into after the events of 1914, Lessing believes she has inherited the repercussions of World War One. She subsequently claims to have been subjugated to feelings of displacement her entire life, and tells us it is in the hope "to get free" (viii) that she writes about the war and about how it induced in her a sense of disaffection.

Lessing, then, maintains to have written an auto/biographical narrative to rescue not only her parents but also herself from the effects of war. In what follows I examine these claims in greater detail: I draw attention to the text's internal difference, and call into question both the idea that the fictional biography faithfully portrays her parents and the notion that it gives them lives they might have wished for. Concomitantly, I cast doubt on Lessing's contention that she writes "to get out from under [the Great War's] monstrous legacy" (viii). More specifically, I posit that the sense of dislocation she experiences on account of WWI is not so much something that needs to be discarded but, in fact, that it fuels her artistry.

At the same time, I consider why it is that literary critics neglect to observe the attention the text pays to creativity and storytelling, and why it is that they fail to notice the way the narrative undermines its own claims. Here I maintain that because of the shiftiness of autobiography, Lessing is able to conflate a number of genres, including biography, memoir, essay writing and fiction, and that the ensuing disorientation on the part of the reader makes him or her identify with the sense of dislocation and malaise experienced by the narrator-protagonist herself. I subsequently posit that because we have empathy with the writer, we are made to overlook the fact that neither Lessing nor her parents have their lives enhanced by means of the written word. We do not see, in other words, that warfare in its different forms motivates the text but are duped into believing that *Alfred & Emily* is an attempt to grapple with the past.

The photos

I want to start my discussion by looking at the photos included in Lessing's memoir and by asking if and how they underscore the main issues as set out above. Counting the collage on the front cover of the Harper Perennial edition—printed "by kind permission of the Author" (back cover)—*Alfred & Emily* includes a total of fourteen photos. Of these, seven feature Lessing's dad, six her mother, three herself, two her brother and a further three the old homestead in Southern Rhodesia where she grew up. Contemplating these images so as to ascertain what might have prompted their inclusion, one is struck by the fact that at the

time Lessing writes her memoirs everyone or everything on the photos (including the old farmhouse) has been eliminated, except for the author herself. That Lessing has chosen to include pictures of the dead and departed could therefore be an indication of the omnipresence and omnipotence of death. Put differently, since she is the sole survival of that which was arrested by the camera, it might very well be that the realisation of one's mortality is as much at the heart of Doris Lessing's tale as, at first sight, it seemed to be of Allon White's.

Theory on photography and the fascination it holds for the observer would certainly endorse such a reading of the text's pictures. It is well known, for example, that Roland Barthes links photographs with death. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes posits that photos make us realise our own mortality. Accordingly,

> each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity [...]. In terms of image-repertoire, the Photograph (the one I *intend*) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object [...] I am truly becoming a specter. The Photographer knows this very well, and himself fears (if only for commercial reasons) this death in which his gesture will embalm me. (14, emphasis original)

Ironically, it is exactly the photographer's attempt to seize life that focuses our attention on the fact that one day we will die (92). What is more, not only our own pictures but also those of deceased loved ones can wound our narcissism. Thus the photos of Barthes's mother, the person he loves best in the world, remind him not so much of her as of his *own* vulnerability; he writes, "The horror is this: nothing to say about the death of one whom I love most, nothing to say about her photograph [...]. The only 'thought' I can have is that at the end of this first death, my own death is inscribed; between the two, nothing more than waiting" (93).

Taking Barthes as one's cue, it might be argued that Lessing's photographs intimate her grappling with the transient nature of life and with her own imminent death. While this line of argument is admittedly supported by the detail that she is eighty-nine years old at the time she writes the book, such a reading, however, would appear to be inherent to *all* photographs rather than to Lessing's specifically and, as such, commonplace. Because photos, in other words, point to death by dint of their very nature, seeing them as a manifestation of the author's mortality does not entirely explain their presence in the text.

As death, then, always lingers on the photograph's periphery, it might prove instructive to find an additional way of reading the pictures. Seeing that the book features a number of family portraits one might, for instance, also see them as a form of wish fulfilment. In *Family Frames—Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch argues that family photos often unmask the discrepancy between the fiction of belonging to a perfect family and the actuality of life lived at home. Hirsch claims, "Since looking operates through projection and since the photographic image is the positive development of a negative, the plenitude

that constitutes the fulfillment of desire, photographs can more easily show us what we wish our family to be, and therefore what, most frequently, it is not" (8). The very first images in Lessing's text seem to prove Hirsch's point for they feature a very young, and extremely elegant, Alfred and Emily. Moreover, as they have been softened, the sepia prints give her parents a dreamy, almost ethereal look. Considering the beautiful and dreamlike quality of the photos, as well as the fact that the author announces she has written the first part of the book to reinstate her mother and father as their younger selves, it might then very well be that these pictures—taken well before Alfred and Emily ever met—are indicative of a daughter's desire to go back in time and lay claim to her parents as they used to be.[2] This notion is both underscored and subverted when one compares the early pictures of Lessing's mother and father with those taken after the war, when they married and had a family. In these family group photos Alfred and Emily appear to have lost all their allure. Further, the pictures expose their frailty, for not only do they feature a tired-looking Emily, but they also place Alfred's peg leg (a remnant from the war) in the centre. Thus, whereas the early photographs show the ideal and indicate Lessing's desire for a mother and father she never knew, the later images are more truthful in their portrayal of everyday life and do not attempt to paint over the cracks or show what her family was *not*.

It might, then, be argued that the pictures show the contrast between the reality and the dream, and in this way underline the idea of wish fulfilment. Considering their content and positioning more closely, however, the photos might also be said to draw our attention to *the* event of the early twentieth century—the outbreak of World War One. To be sure, a third of the photographs show Lessing's parents in direct relation to the war: three depict her dad as a soldier, attractive in his military gear, and another shows him convalescing in hospital after having his leg amputated, Lessing's mother (his nurse at the time) sitting beside him.[3] This strong emphasis on the trenches is further enhanced by placing the images in question either on the front cover or in the middle of the book.[4] As the pictures taken after 1918 depict a despondent-looking Alfred and Emily, they indirectly focus our attention on the effects of war. But there is more than visual imagery to suggest the important role the Great War plays in the text. As mentioned before, Lessing tells us in so many words that the reason for writing her story is to talk about the impact the war had on life at home. The photographs, one might conclude, point to the main issues addressed in the text. More than depicting the fear of death, they intimate the central role war plays in Lessing's life and concomitantly indicate her desire for a time when there was no war.

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[2] This notion is discussed in detail later in the chapter.

[3] While the photo is not commented on in *Alfred & Emily*, in the essay "Impertinent Daughters" Lessing describes the picture as showing "[her father] in bed in the Royal Free Hospital, a handsome man, but minus a leg and inwardly in torment. Beside him Sister McVeagh sits wearing her full white veil, sewing, her eyes on her handiwork" (56).

[4] In *Doris Lessing: A Biography*, Carole Klein makes a related claim. She argues that "war was a defining element of [Lessing's] life. […]. Among the many early photographs of her father, the largest presents a darkly handsome young man wearing a World War I officer's uniform" (6).

The father

Alfred Tayler has his life irrevocably changed by the outbreak of the Great War. As far as physical injuries are concerned, he loses one of his legs in combat and has to wear a prosthesis for the rest of his life. This once "vigorous and healthy man" (152) is not, however, only crippled by the war but is also disabled when he contracts diabetes in middle age. For, at the time, the handling of the disease was rudimentary and highly ineffective. Lessing tells us that, following doctors' orders, her father reduced his food intake so drastically that "[her] image of him is this haunted, gaunt man, sitting at the table with, beside him, little brass scales, where he measured an ounce of this, two ounces of that, half a scone, a little potato" (255).

Diabetes makes Alfred's life unbearable and is then also officially the reason he dies. Lessing, however, holds the trenches accountable for her father's premature passing. The reason she believes that it was the war, and not illness, that ultimately killed her father off is because of the mental anguish he experiences on its account. To specify, because he witnesses atrocities during the war, Alfred often has nightmares and feels stuck "inside a dark cloud" (154). There is no doubt in Lessing's mind that her father suffered from PTSD and that the war took away his will to live:

> [My father] never recovered from the trenches. He died at sixty-two, an old man. On the death certificate should have been written, as cause of death, the Great War. (vii)

The anguish Alfred is subjected to understandably invokes sympathy in his daughter. It also explains why she feels partly responsible; "His children," she says, "certainly, were no joy for my father. […]. As for his daughter, [she] left a husband and two children and married a German, classed as an enemy alien" (257). Because she feels guilty about not bringing him much happiness, Lessing tends to overlook her dad's less attractive attributes such as his lack of business sense and his self-pity. That is not to say that these minor failings do not come through in the text, but that Lessing does not dwell on them. Instead, she focuses on her father's courage and resolve, and draws our attention to the fact that in spite of his disability he still managed to perform physically exerting tasks:

> I've seen [my father] go down a rough mine shaft in a bucket, his wooden leg sticking out and banging against the rocky sides. He ran, or hobbled, in fathers' races at my brother's school. He climbed a difficult tree to a tree-house made by my brother and me. He would go stomping through the bush, more than once taking a fall, or clamber over the great clods in a ploughed field. (152)

Lessing, then, not only admires her father for his courage but also has tremendous empathy with the way war and illness took away his will to live. But being so close to a parent does not only have its upsides; because she identifies so closely with Alfred, she also shares in his suffering. When he is older and she visits him at his sickbed, she says:

> But [my father] and I understood each other well. When I sat with him on those long afternoons and evenings, he would hold my hand and we were complicit in a rage of understanding. I think my father's rage at the Trenches took me over, when I was very young, and has never left me. Do children feel their parents' emotions? Yes, we do, and it is a legacy I could have done without. What is the use of it? It is as if that old war is in my own memory, my own consciousness. (257-258)

The emotional distress Alfred suffers on account of the war seems, then, to be passed on to his daughter even though she never witnesses any of the fighting herself. In similar vein to Jakob and Ben who, as we saw in the chapter on *Fugitive Pieces*, suffer from transgenerational haunting, Lessing is burdened with her father's memories of the war. In addition, the many stories he tells make her share in his war experiences. Lessing tells us about "his obsessive talking about the Trenches" (170) and that subsequently "[she] had the full force of the Trenches, tanks, star-shells, shrapnel, howitzers—the lot—through [her] childhood, and felt as if the black cloud he talked about was there, pressing down on [her]" (170). This vicarious experience of the war is so powerful and her ensuing anxiety so real that Lessing says she might have experienced the fighting first-hand. Indeed, because her father's descriptions of the war are almost palpable, she remarks, "I remember crouching in the bush, my hands tight over my ears: 'I won't, I will not. Stop, I won't listen.'" (170). Alfred, however, either does not pay heed to or does not know about his daughter's exhortation that he stop. As a result, Lessing's home is turned into a place where she feels increasingly uncomfortable and from which she becomes more and more determined to escape.

Precisely because Lessing identifies so closely with her father, she willy-nilly inherits his emotional anguish and his anger at the war.[5] While the trenches, then, filter down to her by means of her father, they also get to her through her mother. This is because Emily's life alters so drastically as a result of World War I that she becomes, for her daughter at least, impossible to live with. The upshot of this strained relationship between mother and daughter is that they are embroiled in their own, domestic war. While it is not a war which entails trenches or guns, its effects are comparable with those of physical combat as it leaves Lessing feeling deeply disturbed and out of place.

The mother

In Chapter 2 I argued that war has long-enduring consequences for those who experience it directly as well as for those who live through it by proxy. War pervades our everyday lives and adversely affects the relationships we have with those people we love the most. According to Michel Foucault, warfare is part and parcel of humanity. In "Society Must Be Defended" Foucault posits that war is interminable and intersubjective, and that it is fought on the battlefield as well as at home. Since "there is a war that is going on beneath peace" and since

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[5] Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling point out that one might experience both ease and unease in one's home. They argue that "Home [...] is a *place*, a site in which we live. But [...] home is also an idea and an imaginary that is imbued with feelings. These may be feelings of belonging, desire and intimacy [...] but can also be feelings of fear, violence and alienation" (2, emphasis original).

"a battlefront runs through the whole of society, continuously and permanently" (51), Foucault believes that "We are […] at war with one another" (51). Consequently he posits, "There is no such thing as a neutral subject. We are all inevitably someone's adversary" (51).

Elisabeth Bronfen has applied Foucault's idea to her reading of *Much Ado About Nothing* and has suggested that war is continued at the home front after Don Pedro and his men return home to Messina. She argues that "the way war spills into peace time" ("The day after battle" 64) is evinced in the battle fought not only between lovers but also between siblings and words/language (65). The idea that war is continued in the course of our daily lives and that it leads to strife between family members might be brought in relation to Lessing's text and extended to include the war waged between parents and their kids, and especially between mothers and daughters. *Alfred and Emily* namely depicts the way in which actual combat "spills" (Bronfen, "The day after the battle" 64) into the domestic sphere by circuitous ways, leading to conflict between family members and inducing the individual to feel alienated and ill at ease at home.

In volume one of her autobiography, *Under My Skin*, Lessing herself describes the altercations she has with Emily as a "war" (178). Lessing certainly has an unhappy relationship with her mother, someone whom she cannot identify with in any way. To start, Lessing finds it impossible to relate to her mother's mawkishness. Rhetorically she asks, "isn't sentimentality intolerable because it is false feeling?" (156). Another reason Lessing dislikes her mother so much has to do with the fact that she one day simply declares she has had a heart attack. That Lessing does not believe her is evident:

> This was a nurse. […]. She had nursed the wounded of a world war, and now it is easy to see she was in a state of dreadful anxiety, she was full of panic, she could look ahead and see she was trapped, with no way out. A heart-attack. So she said. (157)

So incensed is Lessing that she tells us "To this day I can feel the outrage I felt then" (157). But the resentment she feels towards her mother comprises more. She tells us in no uncertain terms "I hated my mother. I can remember that emotion from the start, which it is easy to date by the birth of my brother" (179).[6] Lessing intimates that when "[Harry], aged seven, said to [their mother], 'You must not call me Baby.'" (178), Emily becomes determined to "*live through [her daughter]*" (183, italics original). Lessing, in turn, resents her mother for wanting to use her as a vessel through which she can satisfy her own desires. Yet her feelings about her mother are ambivalent. This largely has to do with the fact that Emily is a contradiction in terms, for while she is feeble she is also courageous. The narrator tells us that what she will never comprehend is how the person who feigned a heart attack because she could nothing cope with life is the very same woman who defied her upper middle-class

[6] Lessing tells us, "My mother was convinced that I would be a boy and didn't even have a name for a girl" (178). In "Impertinent Daughters" she further writes, "The birth was difficult. […]. Above all, I was a girl. When the doctor wanted to know my name, and heard that none had been prepared, he looked down at the cradle and said softly, 'Doris?'" (61).

English upbringing and went against the distinct wishes of her father to become a nurse during the First World War. Thus, at the same time Lessing is annoyed with her mother for being weak she is also impressed by how strong she is.

Lessing's double bind—that she simultaneously loves and dislikes her mother—becomes evident when she tells us that although at times "[she] was wild with pity for her" (182), "[she] had to get free" (183). This longing accompanies Lessing from a very young age. She tells us that she used to dream about "a life so far from anything in Banket, Southern Rhodesia, that it had all the glamour of Never Never Land" (201). However, there are also actual attempts at absconding, such as "planning to run away" (156). Because they are unsuccessful, but also because "Running away, the furious criticism implied in it, was made bland by [Emily] laughing at it" (180), these aborted attempts are less productive than they are destructive, and finally leave Lessing feeling even more frustrated than before.

Lessing contracts measles as a teenager and is isolated for about a month and a half. To Lessing, being severed from her mother makes her temporary abode a heterotopia bar none;[7] "That was such a good time"(181), she says, "Perfect isolation, peace, no pressures. I understood how I could be, how life might be" (181-182). Another time, when "A charity sent the children of settlers for holidays, and [she] was rescued from the miseries of that house" (183), she gains the perspective she needs to see that she is an autonomous subject. She declares that "When I had to return to the farm it was only a question of when I would leave it" (183). Not surprisingly, then, as soon as she can, Lessing becomes a nursemaid in and around Salisbury. But being geographically removed from home, she quickly realises, does not release her from her mother's sway. In fact, Emily's hold over her daughter manages to transcend spatial borders. Among others, she visits Lessing's new employer, Mr Lamb, "to tell him that [her daughter] was wrong-headed, and he ought to know whom he was employing" (265).

What baffles Lessing to the point of frustration is that her mother could have changed from being a woman who took care of war patients to someone who had to fake a heart attack in order to get sympathy from her family. In this respect Lessing tells us, "It took me years—and years—and years to see it: my mother had no visible scars, no wounds, but she was as much a victim of the war as my poor father" (172). The reason Lessing holds WWI responsible for Emily's turning into a hypochondriac and a clinging mother is that she believes it demolished her hopes and dreams for the future. This is not only because "[Emily's] great love, a doctor, drowned in the Channel" (vii) and because she marries Alfred Tayler instead, but also because she is subsequently forced to leave England.[8] Exiled to a

[7] Foucault's concept of heterotopia was invoked in the Introduction; see footnote 33.

[8] Because it was hard for war veterans to make a living in England after the war, Alfred went to work for an English bank in Persia in 1919. When the family visited England in 1924, Alfred was taken by the idea of farming in Africa and the family set off for their new dwelling (Klein 8-21).

farm on the African continent, Emily is slowly made to realise that she will never again have "her hectic life in Persia, all parties and fun" (174).[9] Instead, she must come to grips with the harsh realities of being confined to a house with rudimentary amenities and to a place where the highlight of her week is going into town.

After many years of contemplation, Lessing finally understands how it might have happened that Emily changed from being an autonomous woman to a meddling mother. This, however, does not detract from the fact that while she is growing up she resents her mother and feels ensnared at home."I felt as if I was caught in a spider's web" (267), she tells us, "I always in flight from her, she always in pursuit" (267). Considering the fact that spiders come to stand in for Emily, we might begin to understand what Lessing means when she says that her reasons for not missing home have to do with spiders. That is to say, when she tells us that she refuses to smooth over the past by reminding herself of all the vicious and venomous spiders in Africa, we realise that she is not only referring here to real spiders but also to the big mother spider waiting at home to devour her daughter:

> If I have moments of sentimentalizing the bush, I make myself remember how, when walking quietly through the trees, I might find myself in the middle of a spider's web that clung like the poisonous one in an old myth or fairy story. The spider was vibrating with fury not an arm's length away. (225)

Because she finds Emily impossible to live with, Lessing feels ill at ease at home. Significantly, the war is held accountable for this state of affairs; i.e. the troubled relationship Lessing has with her mother is seen as the result of Emily's having her hopes and dreams destroyed by the First World War. As we have seen, however, the trenches are not only made accountable for the war Lessing wages with her mother but also for the fact that she inherits her father's emotional anguish. Thus the Great War filtrates down to Lessing through her mother as well as her father, and finds its way into their home in more ways than one. Here it exposes Lessing to nonstop combat—vicarious *and* real—and forces her to plot her getaway.

"*a very anti-war book*"[10]

As many a critic has noted, there is more than one reason which might account for Doris Lessing's sense of dislocation. To start with, she grows up in a country in which she and her settler family are essentially foreigners. At the same time, being from one of the colonies makes her different from other English people and hence gives her outsider status when she

[9] Emily, according to Carol Klein, "thought she was going to some place like Kenya, which was considered quite fashionable at the time. Consequently, she took along all the accoutrements of the glamorous life: lovely clothes, her piano, calling cards, and a governess for her children"(21).

[10] The phrase "a very anti-war book" is Lessing's, see O'Reilly, p. 7.

later emigrates to England.[11] While Gayle Greene has suggested that Lessing is "doubly exiled" (8), she has also pointed out that her exile is not only geographical. Indeed, as Lessing is subjected to "an emotionally fraught family life, rife with unspoken tensions and disappointments" (9), Greene argues that Lessing feels uncomfortable within the confines of her home. In *Doris Lessing—Border Crossings,* Alice Ridout and Susan Watkins similarly draw attention to the uneasiness Lessing experiences in the family set-up. But in contrast to Greene who puts Lessing's malaise down to familial relations, Ridout and Watkins believe that her sense of dislocation has to do with the fact that the two worlds she grew up in are conflated at home. Accordingly they posit that Lessing's home was "an interstitial and contradictory space existing between her mother's British middle-class ideals and the African bush" (115).

In addition to observing the multiple instances of homelessness in her life (whatever their cause), literary critics have noted that dislocation is also a staple of Lessing's *writing*. In this respect, Carole Klein has posited that "[Lessing's] disquiet and disaffection powerfully energise her work" (2), and Susan Watkins that "exile and migration are at the centre of […] her work as a whole" (1). *Alfred & Emily* seems to belong to Lessing's body of work as it addresses the discomfit she experiences at home and brings to the fore her sense of being displaced.[12] But this last book of Lessing's does more than merely invoke exile; indeed, it also self-reflexively comments on the reasons for doing so. As intimated before, Lessing declares that she writes about the war to grapple with the past. As writing involves retrospect, she believes that it can give her insight into the way the Great War affected the relationship she had with her parents as well as make her understand how it induced in her a sense of not belonging.

Lessing has unequivocally designated *Alfred & Emily* as "a very anti-war book" (O'Reilly 7). In an interview with Sarah O' Reilly, Lessing confirmed that although it had not initially been the intention, the memoir was turning out to be a comment on the destruction wreaked by World War One:

> It is a very anti-war book. Though I'm not setting out to write it as such, that is what is emerging. (7)

By virtue of the fact that her narrative holds the Great War accountable for changing her parents as well as for negatively affecting her own life, Lessing certainly seems to be offering a comment on the senselessness of the trenches. This idea is underscored by the emphasis she places on the calamitous consequences of war, not only as concerns her immediate family

[11] Lessing left for England in 1949. It is worth noting that her status in Rhodesia changed from voluntary to enforced émigré. According to Eddy L. Harris, "[Lessing] was indeed forbidden the land she grew up in. She was allowed to enter for a short time and to travel there, but only by special permission. And for the 25 years that followed, she was forced to live in exile" (par. 7).

[12] Here Robert Edwards's definition of exile seems pertinent, namely that "Under various guises, exile means separation, banishment, withdrawal, expatriation, and displacement; its emotional expression is loss, usually manifested as sorrow, though sometimes as nostalgia" (15).

but also countless others. These include their neighbours in Rhodesia; Lessing tells us that "There were half a dozen people in the District who came to the music evenings. They were nice people, but they were also war victims. Two had wooden legs, one a wooden arm; one was a war widow" (*Alfred & Emily* 177). She further comments on the savageness of war by pointing out that there was a "generation [of women] that did not find husbands: they were killed in the war" (141). This senseless killing induces Lessing to implicitly agree with a woman she meets at a museum that "'It's as if [soldiers] were just rubbish […]. Like rubbish, to be shovelled into the Trenches. They weren't worth anything […]" (258). These views are also in accordance with her father's beliefs that they were "cannon fodder" (258).

Writing, then, allows Lessing to talk about the futility and destructiveness of war. But what it also does is give her the chance to cut herself loose from its effects; she tells us, "And *here* I still am, trying to get out from under that monstrous legacy, trying to get free" (viii, my emphasis). One of the reasons that writing might help her cast off war's "monstrous legacy" (viii) is the simple fact that it affords her the opportunity to *talk* about it. This, at least, seems to be the insight she achieves shortly before her brother passes; "[Harry] was suffering that need of the old: he needed to explain something before it was too late" (252). As Lessing is in her late eighties at the time she writes her memoirs, it might be argued that what she says of her brother is also true for her, and that she too might wish "to explain something before it was too late" (252). Unlike Harry, though, her need to recall and explicate are arguably better aided in writing than in speaking. Indeed, as writing is Lessing's trade, it seems quite obvious that she will foremost communicate her sentiments by means of the written word.

Another reason intimated why writing can help the subject cut loose from the past is that between the event itself and the recording thereof, time elapses. As Lessing writes so poignantly:

> How attractive are the tidy conclusions of hindsight! How satisfying the *of course* of the back-looking perspective. (173)

To illustrate the way in which writing retrospectively might provide insight, I want to return to a point made in the foregoing section, namely that Lessing only begins to comprehend "much later" (170) why her mother changed so drastically. This, in the first instance, required that she let time elapse; but what it also required Lessing to do is to put something on paper. Put differently, it is only by virtue of the fact that she *writes* and that writing takes place *after* the event that Lessing has the distance she needs to make connections between past happenings and feelings of alienation. Only in this way does she apprehend that the Great War ruined her mother's hopes and left her atrophied and weak. She tells us:

> When [my mother] was ill, shortly after reaching the farm, she was intolerably sentimental, and this leads me straight into the hardest part of what I am trying to understand. (156)

and concludes a few pages on:

> *Now* I look back and know that she had a bad breakdown. That woman whimpering in her sickbed, 'Pity me, pity', it was not her. (159, my emphasis)

As was found with works looked at before, writing in *Alfred and Emily* is endorsed as a way of revisiting the past so as to comprehend how certain events might induce displacement and disaffection. But while writing has previously been upheld as that which can give us insight into the past, it has also been seen as providing a means of escape. Indeed, as it allows us to break loose from that very past which (at a later stage in life) it might help us assimilate, the medium of books might be said to serve a dual purpose. Of course, in order to eschew past reality, the type of writing in question does not have to be *life* writing, nor does it have to be one's own. In Lessing's case it is the make-believe world of fictional tales rather than "classic autobiography" (Fichtelberg 1)[13] which allows her to flee the dreary realities of everyday life. An indication of this is Lessing's love for stories and storytelling, something indebted to her mother and which she learns early on in life. She tells us "But while I can remember vividly the difficult things [...] I remember better a delight of my childhood that began about the time my mother got out of bed. She told us stories" (163).

Besides listening to her mother's yarns, Lessing would indulge in children's books. To her they were a "plenitude [and a] great heavenly provision" (165) for they allowed her to become "sunk in a slow dream" (184). While the stories of others help her to temporarily break away from the oppressive atmosphere at home, Lessing also shows a propensity to create her own fantasy world. One indication of this is her youthful obsession with unpacking the contents of the suitcases her parents took with them on their journey to Africa in 1924. Instead of giving us a simple inventory, the narrator creatively describes the lives she believes her mother and father were fantasising about:

> In those trunks and cases was everything for their imagined life. My father's had accoutrements and clothes for cricket: he had scarcely played in Persia, but now he was going to a British colony and cricket there must be. A trunk held riding things. Not for hunting in the English manner—foxes and stags—but what a gentleman who always rode rather than walked would need. A long wooden case held his wooden legs. My mother's imagined life held more variety. First, the trunk with the dozen or so dark-red leather volumes of music scores—Liszt, Beethoven, Chopin, Grieg, all of them—and, too, sheets of popular music, music-hall songs and ballads sung when she was a girl around an Edwardian piano. A trunk, 'Wanted on Voyage', of evening frocks, scarves, gloves, hats, boas, bags, silvery stockings, brocaded shoes. (164)

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[13] "[In] classic autobiography," argues Joseph Fichtelberg, "[the] subject imposes aesthetic order on the messy materials of life" (1). The way in which the term has been used in my own work implies *that* practice of life writing which takes as its basis the idea that an individual can fully know him- or herself. As such, the autobiographer is seen as giving a true account of his or her life in which fiction is divorced from fact.

The type of creativity evinced in the passage above gives us insight into the way Lessing from an early age would put herself in her parents' shoes and would wonder about the aspirations they had when they left for new shores. It explains how it happened that in her mind's eye she would picture them having a very different kind of existence, had conditions in Africa been less harsh and had the farm done better. This brings me to the other reason Lessing cites for the creation of *Alfred & Emily*, namely that by giving her parents better (fictional) lives, she will liberate them from the war. In what follows, I discuss to what extent Lessing manages to undo the consequences of war through her writing. As such I take an in-depth look at the substitute life she creates for Alfred and Emily and turn my attention to Part One.

Romancing the family

Lessing declares she wants to give her parents an altogether different kind of existence by rewriting their life story. Of course, turning her mother and father into fictional characters also enables her to reconfigure—or even wipe out—her own life. Reading the above one cannot but be reminded of Freud's theory of the family romance.[14] According to Freud, children start off in life believing their mother and father are near flawless. However, as soon as they begin to juxtapose their parents with those of friends and acquaintances, they realise that they are not as perfect as initially thought. Because they feel alienated from their parents, children begin to fantasise about having a different mother and father, and to exchange them with persons of a higher social standing ("Family Romances" 237-241).

With the above in mind, it might be argued that the first part of *Alfred & Emily* is an extended family romance. Now, while family romance theory admittedly focuses on the new life children dream up for *themselves*, the novella primarily concerns the make-believe life of the narrator's *parents*.[15] This, however, should not prevent us from making obvious connections between Lessing's fictional biography and Freud's text—this not only because of the fact that Alfred and Emily's story has its roots in the writer's youthful daydreaming, but also because it envisages a life in which the child and her parents are completely severed from one another.

It is, then, Lessing's parents and their fabricated existence that make up the core of the "novella" (*Alfred & Emily* 1). Hence, in what follows, I will not so much focus on how Lessing undoes her own life by giving her parents a new one, as examine the claim that she uses a form of faction[16] to change the course of history and to give her parents the type of life they might have wanted. In the previously referred to interview with Sarah O'Reilly, Lessing states

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[14] Freud's family romance has previously been invoked; see Chapter 1 footnote 4.

[15] Lessing, then, deviates from Freud's family romance in that she does not so much fantasise about having different parents as that she turns her flesh-and-blood parents into imaginary people. However, in the second section of the book, Lessing (albeit very briefly) indicates that as a child she did have a textbook family romance: "I told [my mother] […] that she was not my mother, who was in fact the Persian gardener […]. I knew, of course, that the gardener, being male, could not be my mother, but necessity somehow overruled this disability" (180).

[16] See the Introduction footnote 17.

that *Alfred & Emily* is not only a comment on the war but that it is also a way of amending the past:

> Both my parents were remarkable in different ways, but it occurred to me rather late that whilst it was very obvious that my father was done in by war, the impact on my mother was much more difficult to see. *Now I propose to put that right*. (O'Reilly 7, my emphasis)

The way Lessing proposes to "put [things] right" (O'Reilly 7) is to rewrite history and give her mother and father an existence that might have suited them. Lessing says in the Foreword to *Alfred & Emily*, "If I could meet Alfred Tayler and Emily McVeagh now, as I have written them, as they might have been had the Great War not happened, I hope they would approve the lives I have given them" (viii). One of the first things one notices when looking for ways in which Alfred and Emily's lives might be enhanced by virtue of the fictional text is the fact that they are endowed with many personable attributes as well as an enormous amount of vitality. Alfred, for one, is portrayed as a virile young adult and an outstanding sportsman. Significantly, he is able to maintain his good shape when he gets older. Unlike the actual Alfred who had to wear a prosthesis and who suffered from diabetes, fictional Alfred at the age of forty is said to be "still a tall, well-made man, holding himself straight" (102). More impressive than his physiognomy, however, is the fact that he is kind-hearted and trustworthy—characteristics which make him endearing. The narrator tells us, "his smile was certainly enough to win the heart of anybody at all who was not his mother" (17). Precisely because he has so many positive attributes, less attractive ones such as being indifferent to homework or being "susceptible" (126) do not seem important, and certainly do not impede him from emerging as the "hero" (11) of the story.

Though arguably less agreeable as a person, Emily seems to have more natural ability than Alfred. She is an excellent student, "always first in everything, head girl at school, carrying off prizes" (5). The most striking thing about Emily, however, is her inner resolve and her fearlessness as for flouting convention. A case in point is when she denies her refined middle-class upbringing and decides to train as a nurse. Seeing that in the early 1900s "it was modish, not to say daring, still, for girls to live in a flat and keep themselves" (25), she further openly scorns propriety when she and Daisy decide to live in an apartment on their own. While it is true that the strong-minded Emily finally allows social mores to dictate her life when she ties the knot with Dr William Martin-White and he demands that she become a housewife, this turns out to be a passing phase in her life. To be sure, when it eventually dawns on Emily that she has become a mere marionette in the hands of her husband, and that this is making her gloomy, she firmly resolves "to get herself out of [that] place" (55). She subsequently informs her husband, "'I am going to have music evenings'" (55). To the narrator, this act of telling her spouse of her intentions (instead of asking him) is an indication of Emily's firmness; she writes, "The formidable machine of that energy of hers was behind that *I*. It was rescuing her" (55, italics original). When the unthinkable happens

and Dr Martin-White passes away, it is once again Emily's "formidable machine of [...] energy" (55) that comes to her salvation, for she assumes control by establishing her own chain of schools.

In addition to infusing her parents with verve and vitality, Lessing appears to give them more desirable lives than the ones they had in reality by marrying them off to the type of people she believes they would have liked. Thus, although fictional Alfred and Emily meet as young adults, there is never the expected coup de foudre and they are never romantically entangled. As far as Emily is concerned, Lessing ostensibly satisfies her mother's fantasy of an exciting life by having her make-believe counterpart marry a successful cardiologist. Alfred, on the other hand, is made to fall in love with Betsy Somers. The reason this might be seen as an improvement on the actual Alfred's life is that Betsy is depicted as a mother figure and as someone who could give Alfred the love his own mother never did. What is more, as she is given the thumbs up by her husband's future employers, Betsy helps make it possible for Alfred "to be an English farmer" (vii), and for Lessing to "[give] him his heart's desire" (vii).

Espoused to other people, Lessing's parents are seemingly given the lives they always wanted to have. Despite apparently executing their wishes, however, something seems amiss. Indeed, when one considers the depiction of their respective partners in more detail, the suggestion that Alfred and Emily find suitable spouses in Betsy and William appears to be tongue-in-cheek. Put differently, the fact that a derisive tenor can be discerned in the description of Betsy as "a small, plump girl with fair hair in curls and little ringlets, and cheeks that mottled easily when it was hot" (29), or in the depiction of Dr Martin-White as "tallish, perhaps too thin, with a hesitant manner, as if he felt he presumed" (31), seems to suggest that the writer is not as sincere in her sanctioning of Alfred and Emily's partners as initially believed.

The reader's suspicion that Lessing is disparaging of Betsy and William is further heightened by the intimation that they are, for diverse reasons, incapable of making their spouses happy in marriage. Life with Betsy brings with it such curtailment that Alfred feels confined in marriage. While he misses his "dancing days" (44), he also feels uneasy round Betsy's "hot, treacherous stomach, which he knew could seethe and heave as you looked at it" (47). But although Alfred might have second thoughts, he never shares these with his wife. Instead he is said to put on a brave face, "swallowing his regrets, reluctance, reservations" (47).

As does Alfred, Emily feels imprisoned at home, not least of all because she and her husband are incompatible. Due to the fact that Dr Martin-White forbids his wife to work, but also because he is not a good lover, Emily's marriage turns out to be deeply unsatisfactory. When Emily eventually discloses to Daisy's mother that "she [is] so unhappy she could die" (53), Mrs Lane rightly assumes it is because "William didn't seem much of a man—certainly not one right for Emily" (53).

Both Alfred and Emily are, then, unlucky in love. But there is another aspect of their fictional lives which does not quite fit in with the writer's proclaimed scheme of giving her parents a better past, namely the fact that they are both deprived of parental love. Not only is Emily deprived of her mother when she is a toddler, but her father soon remarries a woman who is unfeeling. Bereft of a mother's love, Emily does not get much affection from her father either. Indeed, when John McVeagh sees that his daughter is intent on becoming a nurse instead of attending university as he had wished, he bans her from his house. The closest Emily comes to parental love is by spending the holidays with Daisy Lane's family. It is especially Mrs Lane with whom Emily has a special bond—while Mrs Lane loves her as if she were her own, Emily thinks of her as "her real mother" (54) and seeks her out whenever she is melancholy or in need of guidance.

Alfred is as in need of parental love as Emily. While his dad "spent every moment of his spare time playing the organ in the church" (6), his "mother had not liked her second son, Alfred, or behaved as if she didn't" (6). The narrator further tells us that "Alfred's misfortune in his mother had long been known, discussed, and the boy was given all kinds of indulgences and special favours from people who were sorry for him" (6-7). The most prominent among these is Daisy's mother, who "had said often enough that she loved the boy as if he were her own, and she wished he were" (7). As with Emily, Mrs Lane becomes a surrogate mother for Alfred. At the same time, Alfred finds a foster father in Bert Redway's dad; the narrator tells us, "what could have been said [by Mr Redway] was something on the lines of, ' I wish you were our son, Alfred. […]'" (30).

To bring all of the above together, Lessing purports to have rewritten her parent's past by cancelling out World War I and by making them marry completely different people. While this might so, the question is, to what extent does the text see them have *satisfying* lives? Put differently, how much (if at all) does the text give Alfred and Emily the type of existence which "they would approve" (viii)? Though they are, admittedly, endowed with good health and pleasing attributes, this does not take away the fact that they are basically dissatisfied. Indeed, considering the fact that they are unloved at home and disillusioned in marriage, it is questionable whether Lessing's mother and father are more content in the fictional than in the actual world. That Lessing uses her authorial power to bestow on her parents an existence deprived of love cannot but make us suspect that—regardless of what she *says*—she did not really want to give them an existence which "they would approve" (viii). Assuming this to be so, one is tempted to come up with reasons for the author's seemingly paradoxical deed. One idea might be that Lessing wants to suggest that even if her parents' longings *had* been met, this would not have given them satisfaction. Another explanation could be that it allows Lessing to gratify youthful fantasies and to exact a revenge on her parents for immersing her in war.

Taking into account, however, that Lessing is eighty-nine when the book is published, the above arguments seem immature and not completely plausible. But, if it is not a matter of

childish spite, what then might be the author's intentions? For reasons that will become apparent in due course, it is the contention here that underlying the deed of adding adversity is the fact that it enables Lessing to give the fictional biography the tension it needs to become a good story.[17] In fact, as we will see, spinning a good yarn takes poll position in Lessing's thinking. Thus she writes not so much as a way of undoing the war or of enhancing her parents' existence as she does to capture the reader's attention.

Storytelling

There might, then, be a different motivation behind writing a fictionalised chronicle of Alfred and Emily's past than what is suggested in the text. In what follows I develop the idea that it is unfeasible to tell a gripping yarn if there is no exciting plot by looking at the emphasis placed on the craft of narration, not only in the fictional but also autobiographical part of the text. In this respect, I point out that storytelling has a crucial function in both the make-believe world as well as in the actual world of Lessing's youth. I argue that it emerges as a gratifying and life-sustaining pursuit in which the author, by virtue of the text, is able to indulge.

That the practice of storytelling is fundamental to the everyday, and that it might even restore the individual to life, is foremost discernible in the fictional biography. After her husband passes, Emily is initially apathetic. While she is eventually able to pull herself together, it is discovering her affection for stories which gets Emily out of her lethargy. As chance would have it, Emily one time has to mind young Josie Redway. So Emily starts thinking up stories about Mary's cat. Josie is enthralled, and the news spreads. Before long practically every child in the neighbourhood is demanding that Emily tell them anecdotes. Part of the reason that the tales are such a hit is, as Mrs Lane notes, that "[Emily is] so good at [telling them]" (78). The other part has to do with the children's own avarice:

> Meanwhile, the storytelling was going on, and every day there were more children.
> 'They are hungry for it,' said Emily.
> 'Starving for it,' said Mary. […]. (80)

Recounting stories gives Emily's life new purpose. The narrator tells us that the day she discovered storytelling, "everything in Emily's new life began" (76). Not only does Emily find a sense of fulfilment in her new pastime but it also prompts her to start her own chain of schools. One of the key features of the Martin-White schools is then also that they pursue master storytellers. In order to get good raconteurs, Emily solicits potential anecdotists. While some jealously protect their fictional riches there are others, such as Alistair

[17] Jonathan Culler reminds us that "Aristotle says that plot is the most basic feature of narrative, that good stories must have a beginning, middle and end, and that they give pleasure because of the rhythm of their ordering. […] Essentially […] a plot requires transformation. There must be an initial situation, a change involving some sort of reversal, and a resolution that marks the change as significant" (84).

McTaggert, who share Emily's idea that a fondness for stories is something which should be instilled in children from a very young age:

> Some of the old storytellers behaved as if they were guardians of a store of gold, quickly diminished if used recklessly; other responded to invitations to visit schools and tell stories to small children. This Alistair was a tall, craggy, whiskery man who at once said that to introduce children to the great tradition was more important than anything. (117)

The narrator points out that Emily knows all too well a youngster's life can be made easier if he or she can access "the great tradition [of storytelling]" (117). She tells us that during her hapless childhood, "Books [were] a place of peace and calm, where [Emily] had been able to hide away from … Books were good. Reading was good" (86). This, of course, immediately puts us in mind of a point made in connection with Lessing's own life, namely that the world of fiction also help *her* to break away from the difficult conditions at home. In this respect it might be remembered that Lessing accesses fantasy worlds through reading as well as through listening to her mother's anecdotes. The way especially the latter affected her life is not only evinced by what she says but also by what she shows. That is to say, when we read about "whole epics [that her mother made] out of the mice in the storeroom, the rats, the cats, the dogs, the chickens in the fowl run" (163), we immediately notice that they are like the stories fictional Emily recounts. Thus, at the same time that these cross-references link the two parts of the text, they emphasise the profound impression Emily's stories made on her daughter.

In the fictional as well as in the autobiographical part of the book storytelling, then, is paramount. At this juncture it needs to be pointed out that *Alfred & Emily* is not the first of Lessing's texts to focus on storytelling and its virtues. As Alice Ridout notes in "What Is the Function of the Storyteller?" storytelling has always been a topic of concern for Lessing. Ridout argues that Lessing's idea of storytelling has undergone some alterations. Based on a comparative analysis of "The Small Personal Voice" (1957) and *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside* (1986) she claims that "the change in Lessing's vision of the storyteller [is] from one who provides moral certainty to one who encourages critical doubt" (83-84). Lessing herself, however, has offered a very different interpretation of her work, and has maintained that the purpose of her narratives often does not go beyond telling a good story. In 1980, Lessing told interviewer Christopher Bigsby that, while readers tend not to see it, her stories do not always have a message to convey. While she admits that she might, in former times, have played with the idea that writing can give guidance, she says that she has come to believe that it can accomplish but little. While she concedes that "the function of real art, which [she doesn't] aspire to, is to change how people see themselves" (73), she intimates that writing is fundamental to her life; "I am a writing animal," she says, "and I can't imagine myself not writing; I literally get quite ill if I don't write a bit. Perhaps that is my problem and not anyone else's" (73).

As is apparent from a more recent interview, Lessing has held on to the idea that there is not always an ulterior motive behind her work. When asked by interviewer Susie Linfield whether *Ben, in the World* (2000) is a fantasy novel or realist fiction, Lessing initially responds that the text comes close to *Frankenstein* in that "you have a totally impossible premise, and then you write with extreme realism as if it were true" (62). But she then goes on to say that the real motivation for writing the book was that it would be read:

> But my purpose was to write a story. That's all. To write a story that people would want to read. When I wrote *The Fifth Child*, I had the most hilarious time when people came to interview me, because every one of them said, "Well, of course this is about the Palestine problem." "Of course this is about race problems." "Of course this is about …" And I kept saying, "Look, I have no such thoughts in my head. I was trying to write a story." Which is, after all, my job. (62)

In an essay entitled "Writing Autobiography" (2004) Lessing similarly talks about the compulsion to write stories. Here she suggests that "we tell stories [because] we have to" (98). Further she intimates that tales have to be put into narrative form; she argues, "We must have a pattern in our minds, and we tell stories because we have to conform to that pattern. We need a shape for the tale. A beginning, a middle and an end" (98). The fact that Lessing made the above statement when she was in her mid-eighties suggests that "The Need to Tell Stories" (Bigsby 70) did not abate with the passing of time. On this matter, Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis has suggested that Lessing's productivity as a storyteller remained constant throughout the years. According to Sternberg, " Doris Lessing [has continued] to search for new and appropriate forms to express her late-life creativity. Very often these forms are experimental and exploratory, involving the crossing of boundaries, of genre, gender and even of species" (113). Judith Kegan Gardener has similarly observed a sustained ingenuity in her oeuvre. Commenting specifically on *Alfred & Emily*, Kegan argues that by imagining an "alternative scenario" (161) for Lessing's parents, it allows the author to unwrite her own life "at the same time that it analyses the springs of Lessing's creativity and the continuing sources of her imaginative energy" (161).[18]

The creativity evinced in Lessing's later work testifies to the author's assertion that she wants to write in order that she be read, and not necessarily because she wants to convey a message. Concomitantly, it underscores the importance afforded storytelling in *Alfred & Emily* as well as the idea that in the writing of the text lies the opportunity to tell a gripping yarn. Ironically, these intimations are in opposition to what Lessing's memoir overtly cites as its raisons d'être, namely that it wants to bestow on Alfred and Emily "[lives] they would approve" (viii), while at the same time helping their daughter grapple with the past. I have already questioned the first of these contentions by pointing out that Lessing endows her

[18] Writing on the complex relation between fact and fiction in biography, Richard Holmes argues that there is an "original, underlying tension found in [biography's] genealogy: Invention marrying Truth. The fluid, imaginative powers of re-creation pull against the hard body of discoverable fact. The inventive, shaping instinct of the story-teller struggles with the ideal of a permanent, historical, and objective document" (20).

fictional parents with a problematic existence and that it is therefore doubtful whether she enhances their destiny by means of the text. This begs the question whether Lessing's *other* claim—i.e. that she writes "to get out from under [the Great War's] monstrous legacy" (viii)—might be equally flawed. The question I want to raise next, then, is whether Lessing really writes "to get free [of the war]" (viii). Instead of being disabling, does war in fact *assist* Lessing in writing a good story? Is the First World War, in other words, a ghost of the past that Lessing needs to shake off or is it a source of artistic inspiration?

"*sensation junkies*"[19]

In *Alfred & Emily*, the idea is expressed that war can be more exciting than paralysing. To begin with, Lessing intimates that the exhilaration of doing battle together is something men universally feel interpellated by; she declares, "Three times now I have heard men talking over past happy times with the men they were fighting. They have everything in common" (253).[20] Among those men who share an affinity for war she lists the male members of her family; there is, for example, Lessing's firstborn who, she says, "adored crawling through the bush, armed to the teeth, in great danger" (253). Another relation who revels in warfare is her brother. Lessing tells us that while he served actively in World War II, "During the Liberation War, [her] brother was not a combatant because he was too old, but the farmers too old for actual fighting were out most nights in lorries or armoured cars" (252). It is in connection with these activities that Lessing says, "Harry, like all those men, thoroughly enjoyed it" (252) and that she posits "When pacifists, or people trying to limit war, decide to forget that some men thoroughly enjoy war, they are making a bad mistake" (252).

That men dote on war is evinced not only in Harry and John but also in Alfred. This, according to Lessing, can first of all be gleaned from the fact that her father eagerly reads about the war, the plethora of "books about the Great War in Europe" (169) they have at home proving the point. Yet it seems Alfred finds even more gratification in *conversing* about WWI than in reading about it. In fact, Lessing believes "there are two kinds of old soldier, those who cannot stop talking about their war, and those who shut up and never say a word. […]. My father was of the first kind" (169-170). As to the reasons for this fetish of his, Lessing intimates that, like his son and his grandson, Alfred wallows in the camaraderie of war

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[19] From Lessing, *Under my Skin*, p. 203

[20] Here Lessing seems to ascribe to the traditional type of thinking that equates men with war and women with peace, a notion which has been deconstructed in recent years. In *Women, Militarism, and War*, Jean Bethke Elshtain and Sheila Tobias remark that while "women have been officially separated [from war]" (ix), they have always been implicated in it. According to the authors, "[women] are the homefront helpmeets for whom men fly to arms; they are the 'Spartan Mothers' whose civic identity is bound up with the warrioring of sons" (ix). In the same volume of essays, Janet Radcliffe Richards examines "why the elimination of militarism might be considered a feminist project" (218). Foremost is the view that "militarism is male in the sense that men (but not women) *enjoy* war and aggression, so that it is to men's *advantage* that society should be militaristic; the other is that it is male in the sense that men *cause* wars and other kinds of conflict (whereas women, if they had power, would not)" (218, emphasis original).

(252-253). However, at the same time she also believes that "his obsessive talking about the Trenches was a way of ridding himself of the horrors" (170).

Interestingly, this latter notion is also something Lessing connects to herself in order to help clarify *her* motivation for speaking about the war. As has been mentioned before, Lessing declares she has inherited her father's indignation at the War. Taking this into account, as well as the fact that she believes writing about the war will help her "get out from under [its] monstrous legacy" (viii), she appears to have inherited not only her father's indignation at World War One but also his quest "of ridding himself of the horrors" (170). But while Lessing certainly seems to have inherited Alfred's "obsessive talking about the Trenches" (170)—the multitude of references to the Great War in the text being a case in point—the idea that she writes to liberate herself from the atrocities of war seems to be flawed. This is because Lessing does *not* undergo the First World War per se. Indeed, despite protestations that an indirect exposure to the war induced an agony akin to that of her father's, it is my argument that her vicarious knowledge of the war cannot be likened with what Alfred saw first-hand, nor can her war-related distress seriously weigh up against his.[21] Therefore, while I do not refute her compulsion to talk about the war, I do take issue with the idea that she writes her life story in order to allay the anguish imposed by war.

The above contention is underscored by what she does in the fictional section of the text. Lessing declares to write a fictional biography in order to erase WWI from history and to give her parents a care-free existence in the absence of war. But right here there is a faultline to be detected, for if it were written to eradicate war, why is war included in the "novella" (1)? Indeed, though we are informed that "Britain had not had a war since the Boer War; nor were there wars in Western Europe" (84), war nonetheless threatens and looms in the fictional world of the text. To start with, there are wars being fought at the home front, including those Alfred and Emily wage with their parents and their spouses. But besides such domestic wars there are clear indications of physical battle. We are told that "the young men were going off to London and signing up with recruiters for service in the wars that were going on, in South America, Africa and parts of Asia" (108), and that "The parents of Longerfield were afraid because of their sons wanting to be soldiers" (108).[22]

War, then, seems to be integral not only to the autobiographical but also the fictional section of the book. At the same time, however, the reasons given for including war are undermined by what the text shows. This makes one wonder whether there might not be an altogether different elucidation for the omnipresence of war in the text, and whether Lessing

[21] Carole Klein remarks that "in an experiment with mescaline in the early 1960s some of the sense memories that came to [Lessing] were her father's experience of battle. This frightening event proved to her that the First World War had been an overriding influence on her life as well" (7).

[22] W.M. Hagen provides an idealistic interpretation of Lessing's decision to include war in her fictional biography. He argues that Lessing "is clear-eyed enough to understand that there would have been wars on a less-extensive scale [...] and that a generation of young people who had never known war would be attracted to serve. But she imagines that some might return convinced that they ought to fund efforts to serve the needs of the impoverished they encountered" (78).

might not be one of those "kinds of old soldier [...] who cannot stop talking about their war" (170), not as "a way of ridding [themselves] of the horrors" (170) but because they "thoroughly enjoy war" (252). That is to say, though she claims she needs to write about the First World War because she inherited it, might it not be more plausible that she does so because she finds war exciting? Indeed, instead of something which needs to be grappled with, might war not be that which boosts her artistry and which enhances her storytelling capabilities?

The notion has already been put forward that pain, such as might be undergone in exile, can excite creativity. In the Introduction I quoted Michael Seidel for arguing that adverse conditions such as exile can stimulate the writer's creative impulses (x). On the relation between dispossession and creativity, Robert Edwards has likewise maintained that "exile allows writers to construct sustained fictive worlds" (20). While the type of adversity Seidel and Edwards are talking about admittedly pertains to exile and not to war per se, the point I want to highlight is that misery and artistry are often very closely linked. To bring this in connection to *Alfred & Emily*, it is significant to note that in the past Lessing has established a direct relation between creativity and war. In *The Golden Notebook*, for instance, we find the fictional writer of the story, Anna, equating the artistic inspiration she had for her best-selling book with the exhilaration of war:

> That was the material of *Frontiers of War*. [...]. I remember very clearly the moment I knew I would write it. I was standing on the steps of the bedroom block of the Mashopi hotel with a cold hard glittering moonlight all around me. [...]. I was filled with such a dangerous delicious intoxication that I could have walked straight off the steps into the air [...] And the intoxication [...] was the recklessness of infinite possibility, of danger, the secret ugly frightening pulse of war itself, of the death that we all wanted, for each other and for ourselves.
>
> (149-150)

In *Under My Skin*, Lessing similarly observes that anyone who has been exposed to war afterwards longs to have that type of adventure again: "We are sensation junkies, predisposed to excitement, and if that means danger and death, we are ready for it" (203). Further she suggest that the moment a person realises that war excites her is the moment she knows she is a writer. Lessing tells us that, in her own case, it was listening to "bitter men" (228) talking about the Second World War which helped her see her artistry:

> I was feeling that pleasure, almost an exaltation, which is how a writer may recognize that life is matching her natural disposition—her talents. I had written very little then. But I was listening, selecting—*recognizing*. (228, emphasis original)

The blurb of the 2008 Harper Perennial edition of *Alfred & Emily* claims that through her text Lessing "places [her parents] in lives they never lived—happier lives, where they were friends but never married, and the Great War never cast its awful shadow over their family. [...]. This is Lessing, trying to lay to rest the ghosts of war and its terrible legacy.

Triumphantly […] she has done just that." As we have seen, however, this line of thinking displays some serious flaws. To start with, Alfred and Emily's existence is not enhanced by virtue of the fictional text, for not only are they locked in unfulfilling marriages but they also live in a world not completely untouched by war. Further, as Lessing is never directly exposed to WWI, the claim that she writes "to get free" (viii) of it is dubious. Finally, Lessing's work suggests that she finds war exhilarating; indeed, not only does she intimate that war excites and revivifies but also that it is a source of artistic creativity. These findings, together with the fact that Lessing places so much emphasis on the urge to relate (war) stories, suggests that there is a discrepancy between what the text says and what it shows. In short, while it *claims* to eradicate the catastrophic consequences of WWI, it *attests* to the fact that war inspires one's creativity.

That other war

When she won the Nobel prize for Literature, Doris Lessing said in her acceptance speech that "there is a moment when [the storyteller is] touched with fire, with what we like to call inspiration, and this goes back and back to the beginning of our race, to the great winds that shaped us and our world" ("On not winning the Nobel Prize" par. 94). Succinctly put, it is my suggestion that Lessing is "touched with [the] fire" (par. 94) of war when writing her memoir. Rather than seeing it as a ghostly presence from the past, war gives her the inspiration she needs to tell a gripping yarn. This of course is not to suggest that Lessing condones war but that it provides such rich material that it becomes easy to write creatively. I want to underscore this claim by looking at the different battles invoked in the text. As might have been gleaned from the foregoing, of all the historical wars mentioned, the First World War dominates Lessing's imagination. Subsequently, she only scratches the surface when talking about the wars she actually witnesses. What she writes about the Liberation War is a case in point, for she only mentions it fleetingly and does not so much focus on its atrocities as on its political consequences. She, then, skirts the realities of the war by commenting matter-of-factly that "The white farmers in those beleaguered farmhouses had a long, frightening war, and then there was a black government, and so many misplaced hopes, and then the ugly little tyrant Mugabe" (226).

The other historical battle Lessing brings up almost incidentally is the war of 1939-1945. The first time she refers to World War II is more than two-thirds through the book, and then only to situate historically the time when she would go to "women-only meetings" (189). She further manages to remain distanced from the war by focusing on how *others* perceived it. When the warship Harry was serving on is shelled, for example, she does not tell us how she felt but only what he says of it: "I think I got a bit of a shock" (250). Even when the war ostensibly becomes personal, Lessing still only mentions it by the bye. She accidentally comments, for instance, that it was hard to find boarding then, and tells us in passing that

"[she] cooked for anything up to ten or more RAF most nights, bacon and eggs, sausages and baked beans, anything that [her] two hotplates could provide" (268).

Both the Liberation War and the Second World War are, then, given such short shrift in the text that they appear to be peripheral. In contrast, the Great War is all-pervasive and omnipresent. The reason that the First World War foremost sustains Lessing's creative mind might very well have to do with the fact that she accesses the war through stories she has been exposed to. Thus it might require less effort for her to write imaginatively about this than about the (physical) battles she actually undergoes. That WWI overrides other wars—in Lessing's imagination as well as in the text—can be gleaned from the following passage, in which the narrator describes how WWI continued to dominate the discourse at home, in spite of the fact that daily there would be reports of the current war:

> And my father talked more and more about cannon fodder. 'If you had only known them,' he said, holding my hand hard. 'Such good men. I keep thinking of them.' And my father, crying, an old man's tears, his eyes wide and childlike—an old man's eyes (but he not yet sixty)—and he was murmuring the names of those fine chaps, his men, who died in the mud at Passchendaele, *while the wireless, which was never turned off, told us news from the battlefronts in Europe and in the Pacific.*
> 'I think of them, yes, I do, there's never a day I don't think of them, such fine young chaps …' (258-259, my emphasis)

The First World War, one might argue, acquires such importance in the heads and imaginations of Alfred and his daughter that when it comes to other wars, they are pushed into the background. There is, however, one battle that refuses to be usurped by WWI, namely the war Lessing wages with her mother. The notion was discussed in depth before, but for the purposes of claiming that the Great War alone does not dominate Lessing's artistic mind, the pivotal function that the embattled relationship between Emily and her daughter fulfils in the text needs to be recalled. As the Tayler women are constantly at loggerheads with each other, Lessing feels exiled at home. Thus the war and subsequent unease between them is as much a leitmotiv of the text as World War One. However, the obverse of this statement is also true in the sense that both these wars motivate Lessing to write. Indeed, though it is not a physical battle, it is my contention that the war Lessing wages with her mother excites her creativity *as* much (if not more) as WWI.

This is foremost evinced by the fact that the relationship Lessing has with her mother is not only integral to the writing of *Alfred & Emily*, but also to the creation of a number of her other works. Significantly, it is the author herself who inadvertently focuses our attention on the way in which the rows with her mother stimulated her writing. She namely tells us that "[she] used to write down tales of mother-and-daughter enmities, and [that she] had quite a collection" (267); further she avows to "write down here, just one, the simplest of these exemplary stories" (267):

> A mother and daughter did not 'get on'. Why did the girl not leave home? She stuck around, railing at her mother, but making use of any advantages, such as babysitting or

> handouts. Then her mother had a heart-attack, was helpless. The girl said to her, 'Very well, you've got me where you want me. I'll look after you but I shall never, ever say a word to you again.' And that was what happened. The mother lasted twenty years, and the daughter refused ever to say a syllable. (267)

The autobiographical reference in the text above is unmistakable. However, since the anecdote is extremely terse, it might be argued that this is not a very good illustration of how war at the home front might be a source of creativity. Here one might counter that Lessing has, of course, also produced well-acclaimed, full-length texts that take issue with the hostility between mothers and daughters.[23] The one she is arguably most famous for is *Martha Quest*, published in 1962. This is then also the text Lessing invokes in *Alfred & Emily* to show the influence the relationship with her mother had on her writing. But Lessing does more than declare "*Martha Quest* was, I think, the first no-holds-barred account of a mother-and-daughter battle" (178); she also makes reference to the motivation behind the text when she says "what I was doing was part of the trying to get free" (178). But right here we are led to ask whether this claim is sustainable. That is to say, if Lessing truly wrote *Martha Quest* so that she could be liberated from her mother, how can it be that she was still writing stories about "elemental rivalry" (179) more than fifty years into her career? Put differently, as *Martha Quest* had obviously failed to liberate her, why did she continue "[writing] down tales of mother-and-daughter enmities" (267), and why did she think producing *Alfred & Emily* would help her feel less disturbed by childhood happenings? How many books, in other words, must a person write to be "free" (178), or at least before she realises that no amount of writing will ever liberate her from the past?

Tom Sperlinger has noted that *Alfred & Emily* is not the first book which talks about "the intense feud between Emily McVeagh and her daughter" (67); he posits that "Lessing has covered this ground before and she never quite gets away" (67). While this observation seems self-evident, it is nonetheless one the author herself never makes. Indeed, Lessing seems unaware of the fact that the war with Emily gives her the material she needs to compose good stories. Whether it be deliberate or not she, then, neglects to specify that many of her books—including *Martha Quest* and *Alfred & Emily*—would not have been written if it hadn't been for the "continual fights with [her] mother" (181). This, of course, brings us back to the point I have been labouring as to the text's internal difference, namely that there is a discrepancy between what is said and what is shown to be the motivation behind the text. That is to say, while Lessing claims she writes to be released from war (whether it be waged at home or in the trenches), her work seems to suggest that it is exactly these battles which feed her artistry.

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[23] Victoria Boynton and Jo Malin write in the *Encyclopedia of women and autobiography* that not only are the relations between Lessing and her mother a leitmotif in her autobiographical texts, but that they also feature in her fictional works (410). Boynton and Malin point out that "Although [*Particularly Cats and Rufus the Survivor*] encompasses questions of motherhood, mother/daughter relationships, and the reproduction of mothering across generations in general terms, Lessing's own experience as a mother remains hidden and secondary as compared with the need to retrieve the figure of her own mother, a constant preoccupation" (410).

Critics besides Sperlinger have drawn connections between Lessing's past and her work. In his review of *Alfred & Emily*, Tim Adams, for example, suggests that it is partly because Lessing had an unhappy childhood that she was able to become such a prolific writer and win the Nobel prize. But while Adams might be correct in assuming that this is also something "Doris Lessing [...] has spent a lifetime restlessly discovering" (par. 2), there is little in her work to suggest that this is indeed the case. In fact, the only indication we have that she is aware of the way in which her past motivated her work is through oblique references. A case in point in *Alfred & Emily* is when she focuses on the fact that many of her texts have as their main topic the relationship between a mother and her daughter. Other indications that she understands how war motivated her writing can be found in what she writes elsewhere; in "My Father," for instance, she posits that "We use our parents like recurring dreams, *to be entered into when needed*; they are always there for love or for hate" (89, my emphasis). Another example is what she reveals in an interview with Stephen Gray, held in the mid-eighties. Asked about the function of the storyteller, Lessing declares "We're memories. We are the function of memory" (339), thereby conceding the important role the past plays in the artist's life. Similarly, in *Under My Skin*, she maintains that not only artists but we all of us "make up our pasts" (13), and postulates "You can actually watch your mind doing it, taking a little fragment of fact and then spinning a tale out of it" (13).

In conclusion one can say that while there *are* indications that Lessing realises on some level how past reality animates the artist's creativity, she does not say it flat-out. At any rate, as far as *Alfred & Emily* is concerned, Lessing does not explicitly acknowledge the influence her parents had on her storytelling career. This, however, does not detract from the fact that the battles fought at home gave her material for her work and that they helped put her on the literary map. Now, of course, not everyone who has ever had a unsatisfactory childhood and who has been exposed to war becomes a successful writer. This is because having the material to spin a good yarn is only half the battle. The other half is having the mastery to effectively narrate it, something which Lessing—as I show in the next section—has in abundance.

A hotchpotch of unease

That narrating a compelling story—rather than redressing the atrocities of the past or grappling with feelings of displacement—is paramount can be discerned not only in *Alfred & Emily* but also, by Lessing's own admission, in her other works.[24] As noted before, however, spinning a yarn does not only entail prudently selecting the content; it is also a matter of

[24] Lessing's undertaking to spin gripping yarns is evidently successful. Critics who have remarked on Lessing's longevity include Midge Gillies. While Gillies has noted that "Lessing has written over fifty books [...] and has addressed issues including racism, radical politics, feminism and the disintegration of the family" (105), Raschke et al. have claimed that there is a "continued relevance of [Lessing's] production to a variety of contemporary themes. Wrestling with late-twentieth-century ghosts that continue to haunt our most pressing twenty-first-century dilemmas, Lessing's fiction and nonfiction demand a reformulation of some of our most taken-for-granted assumptions about the contemporary world and how we relate to that world" (1).

effectively utilising literary devices in order to generate affect and to ensure reader participation.[25] In what follows I consequently concentrate on the structure of the text and scrutinize how Lessing uses the techniques of storytelling to bring across the injury generated by warfare. In this respect I maintain that Lessing exploits the shiftiness of the life writing genre, not only to conflate genres but also to fuse the factual and the make-believe. As a result, she induces feelings of displacement and unease in the reader, thereby making us partake in the sense of homelessness she herself is subjugated to. At the same time, however, because we are made to identify so closely with the narrator we are prone to overlook some obvious facts, most notably that this is a *constructed* story with a specific intent. In the final analysis I argue that it is because the life writing genre is applied so skilfully that we fail to recognise that war animates Lessing's creativity.

In order to disconcert and so make us sense her disjointedness, Lessing presents us with a disunited text. To be sure, that textual incoherence indicates internal fragmentation was also an argument made for works discussed in previous chapters. It might be recalled that all of the foregoing texts were said to comprise a mix of autobiographical fact and novelistic fiction on the one hand, and to have multi-layered plots on the other. While it is true that similar factors generate fragmentation in Lessing's text, *Alfred & Emily*'s structure is to be discerned from that of previous texts in that it conflates the factual and the fictive and confounds the plot by fusing not just two but a *number* of genres.[26] Seeing that it is the book's framework which allows for the enmeshment of different literary types as well as for the fragmentation of plot, it requires some explication. *Alfred & Emily* is divided into two main parts, a fictional biography, "Alfred and Emily: a novella" (1), and an autobiographical record of the writer's life, "Alfred and Emily; Two Lives " (149). While the text as a whole is preceded by a "Foreword" (vii), between "Part One" (1) and "Part Two" (149) we are given an "Explanation" (139) for the fictional section, as well as an extract "From the *London Encyclopaedia*" (145). The bigger sections (the biography and the memoir) are moreover sub-sectioned; "Part One" (1), for example, is divided under the headings "1902" (3) "August 1905" (13) and "The Best Years" (24). The other section is adorned with an epigraph from "D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*" (151) and features no less than ten different autobiographical sketches.

The narrative, then, has a fragmented structure, not only because it is divided and subdivided into sections but especially because it features a hotchpotch of different text types, most notably (fictional) biography, memoir, an encyclopaedic entry and a short essay.

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[25] In *Style: The art of writing well*, F.L. Lucas argues that a good writing style implies the ability to "express and convey [...] emotion [...] and to kindle emotions in others. Without emotion, no art of literature; nor any other art" (6).

[26] Literary critics have duly remarked that conflating different genre types is part and parcel of Lessing's writing. While Ridout and Watkins posit that "'border-crossings' [are] integral to her work" (2), Roberta Rubenstein writes that "many of Lessing's fictions themselves unfold through formal shape-shifting, from a novel-within-a-novel to diary and journal entries, parodies, and an assortment of fictional 'documents'—correspondence, book reviews, newspaper clippings, lectures, medical charts, and archival reports" (12).

Having made the claim that the text is segmented, it needs to be said that there *is* an attempt at linking some of its sections—whereas in the "Foreword" (vii) Lessing gives us background information on why it was necessary to reconfigure her parents' lives, in the "Explanation" (139) she gives us insight into her artistry and tells us on whom the personae in the fictional biography were based. But while the above links are apparent, elsewhere any connection between the different sections can only be surmised. A case in point is the entry "From *The London Encyclopaedia*" (145); as it directs our attention on the hospital where Alfred convalesced after his leg was amputated and from where Emily knows her "great love" (vii), this extract manages to covertly point towards the necessity of the first section. By virtue of the fact that it focuses us in on the way in which WWI altered Alfred and Emily's lives, the same claim can naturally be made for the other section too. That is to say, as they hone in on the way in which the war ruined her parents' prospects and altered their personalities, the autobiographical essays validate Lessing's writing a fictional past from which the Great War has been erased.

While there are, then, some links between the different sections, these are mostly tenuous. Switching between various sections but providing little in the way of transition foremost underscores the fragmented nature of the text. But what it also manages to do is to push us out of our comfort zone. This happens every time we are presented with a different text type but is arguably felt most strongly when we move from "Part One" (1) to "Part Two"(149). Indeed, just as we begin to identify with Alfred and Emily, we suddenly find ourselves confronted with the reality of their unreality as their narrative is replaced by that of their daughter's. In this way we are made to shift gears from fictional biography to memoir and to the concrete world, and to transfer our sympathy from make-believe characters in the first section to the protagonist of the autobiographical text, Doris Lessing herself.

Because the connections between the different texts are not always palpable and because readers are wrenched away from one narrative in order to be introduced to the next, the text's structure is discomposing. But while the proximity of disparate texts is an efficacious way of making us feel unsettled and uneasy, there is even more at stake here. As the various segments appear to be slotted into neat categories and to belong either to autobiography, fictional biography, or to an informative or nonliterary type of writing, it initially seems that we are guided in our reading of the text. However, when we look at the text more closely we notice that these generic borders are in fact porous and that they allow different text types to infiltrate one other. An interweaving of genres is possibly easiest to detect in the fictional biography, especially as we are distinctly told in the preface that it emanates not only from Alfred and Emily's past but also from the writer's own life. But the interaction between the make-believe and auto/biographical fact does not merely remain background information; to be sure, as the story progresses and as overt references to Lessing's actual childhood infuse themselves into the fictional world of the first segment, the uneasy mix of memoir and fictional biography becomes explicit. Whenever this happens, there is a jump not only

between literary types but also between what is real and what fabricated. An illustration of this can be seen in the following excerpt, which depicts the time(s) fictional Emily goes to see her father:

> During those years a message came from [Emily's] stepmother that she thought her father would like to see her.
> Not from her father himself, though.
> Emily went to lunch at her old home. Perhaps she went more than once.
> 'But I never forgave him, never, never,' she would insist, eyes flashing, her hands in fists.
> [...].
> 'I was so hungry. [...]. The pay was so bad. I couldn't even buy a pair of gloves,' said my mother, to a girl who was usually out in the bush somewhere [...] with scratched hands, because the sitting hen didn't like being handled, or I had been climbing over a barbed-wire fence. *Gloves!* (27-28, emphasis original)

In the extract above, fictional biography (make-believe Emily being solicited by her father's new wife), actual biography (flesh-and-blood Emily informing her daughter that she resented her father) and autobiography (Lessing the author recalling and recording her younger years) are all made to commingle. More instances of this type of genre crossing can be found in the fictional biography; often they involve a moving back and forth between the omniscient and first person narrator as well as between the actual and fabricated world. Though these transitions are not overtly signalled, it is mostly clear whether the text is referring to the concrete or make-believe world.[27] Nonetheless, there *are* times, such as in the excerpt below, when reality and fiction are so entangled that it is no longer apparent whether it is the biographical or autobiographical narrator who is speaking:

> Emily didn't like dancing much, concerts and the theatre were what she liked, but Daisy asked Alfred up to a Christmas dance for the senior nurses, and there he danced all evening with *one* Betsy Somers. (29, my emphasis)

That Alfred is said to a have "danced all evening with one Betsy Somers" (29) might be an indication of the fact that the fictional events are no longer being depicted by an omniscient narrator but that the autobiographical narrator has taken the reins. That is to say, while "one" (29) might simply be a manner of speaking, it might also imply that Lessing the memoirist is critical of this fictional woman who was to become her actual mother's substitute. Here it is not certain, then, whether we are dealing with autobiography, biography, or with an uneasy amalgamation of the two. Genre blurring can also be found in the autobiographical bit of the text, such as when the third-person narrator intervenes in the narrative. The sketch "Provisions" (233), for example, begins, "Two small children were at the table, which was inside the windows that were 'just like the bow of a ship!' so said my mother. There was a proper little commotion of a scene going on" (233). Thus in between the anecdote we find autobiographical markers; that is to say, by adding "so said my

[27] On one occasion Lessing uses brackets to indicate that we are leaving the realm of fiction behind and accessing actual memory; see *Alfred & Emily* 32.

mother" (233) or "Daddy snaps" (233), the first-person narrator usurps the omniscient narrator. We also see third-person narration infiltrating autobiography in the subsequent essay, "Provisions—in Town" (241) in which Lessing gives a seemingly objective depiction of how typical white middle-class folk pass their time in Banket just to digress in the middle of the sketch and to tell us about her own life.

Lessing's text, then, continually switches between different genres. Part of the reason Lessing is at liberty to alternate between a variety of text types has to do with the shiftiness of the life writing genre.[28] Put differently, it is precisely because autobiography is an inherently homeless genre that Lessing is able to write a story about her past that takes as much recourse to memoir as it does to fictional biography and factual documentation. The upshot of experimenting with autobiography writing in this way and presenting us with a mélange of texts is that induces discomfit and uncertainty—this not only because we are required to find connections between the different segments ourselves but also because we are pushed out of our complacence every time one section ends and the next one starts.

But there is another reason why the mixing of genres incurs displacement and uneasiness. In *Spatiality*, Robert T. Tally Jr. argues that the convention of genre helps readers to better understand narratives. Tally posits that writers make use of devices traditionally linked to a specific genre to guide readers (55-56). As these genre markers help readers get their bearings, Tally compares "genre to a guidebook, whereby the writer, in utilizing or specifying the recognizable elements of a given genre, provides the reader a kind of 'You Are Here'" (56). Tally concludes, "The author, like the cartographer, employs conventional techniques or strategies in trying to prevent the reader of the text or map from getting lost" (56). Naturally, the obverse of this claim is also true, i.e. if we are given contradictory or unclear signals, we *will* get lost. This brings to mind a point made in previous chapters, namely that we make sense of the world through our classification of it.[29] It follows that if a text cannot be categorised because it neglects to unambiguously tell us "You Are Here" (Tally 56) it leaves us feeling disoriented and uncertain—this was the case in *Angela's Ashes*, in *Fugitive Pieces* as well as in *Too Close to the Bone*, and it is also the case here. There are differences, to be sure: while McCourt disguises memoir as fiction and Michaels subtly conflates history with the make-believe, White consciously mixes parts of an old novel with autobiographical fragments. What Lessing does that is different is to add the genre of fictional biography and non-literary writing to that of autobiography and fiction, and to make the links between the different text types tenuous or even non-existent.

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[28] Here I would like to reiterate a basic premise of this study, which is that the malleability of the life writing genre allows for the free movement between different literary types. This matter was comprehensively dealt with in previous chapters; nevertheless, it might be useful at this stage to remind ourselves, in Marlene Kadar's words, that "life writing is not a fixed term [...] it is in flux as it moves from considerations of genre to considerations of critical practice" (3).

[29] See especially the" The autobiographical reader" in the Introduction, and "A malaise shared" in Chapter 2.

More than the other texts looked at in this thesis, *Alfred & Emily* induces in us displacement. This is because it conflates so many genres and text types that it makes it impossible for us to decide whether it is biography, autobiography, fiction or fact. Because we cannot categorically emplace the text, we are made to feel not only disoriented but also disconcerted. In this way, our uneasiness with the text and its disjointed framework is underscored.[30] Moreover, as the story makes us feel uneasy, we are given an inkling of the protagonist's *own* malaise and displacement.[31] This brings us back to an issue briefly invoked before, namely that Lessing is so adept at generating affect and at creating reader identification that we do not query the idea that she writes her tale of woe to liberate herself. Because we are blinded by pathos for the protagonist we, then, take her reasons for writing at face value. The upshot is that we fail to notice the extent to which the wars waged at home enhance her artistry. In contrast to *Too Close to the Bone*, where the reader is required to see the absences so as to come to a better understanding of the writer's past, in *Alfred & Emily* we, then, are not supposed to see that what matters most is telling a gripping yarn, and that war helps Lessing do just that. To be sure, the irony of the situation is not lost on us—it is precisely *because* Lessing is so good at spinning yarns and at generating affect that we do not recognise the urge to be creative, but that all we see is the need to vent her wrath.

The truth

I have been looking at the upshot of mixing different genre types and have suggested that the entanglement of the make-believe and auto/biographical in *Alfred & Emily* unsettles readers and makes them identify with the protagonist's disaffection. Consequently, their gaze is diverted away from the fact that war helps Lessing to tell gripping anecdotes. While I have commented on the performative properties of interweaving the factual and the fictitious, in what follows I will look at constative statements made in this regard. That is to say, I will analyse what the author *says* about the reasons for incorporating a fictional biography into an autobiographical text, rather than looking at what such a multi-layered text actually *does*. I have already discussed one of the reasons Lessing offers for conflating autobiography and fiction, and that "[she hopes her parents] would approve the lives [she has] given them" (viii). But I have also said it is questionable how much Lessing effectively enhances their existence by means of the fictional text, and subsequently intimated that she foremost writes to spin a gripping yarn. I will now concentrate on an altogether different motivation cited for writing

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[30] Susan Watkins has written on the way in which the inability to emplace Lessing's work has affected readers. She argues that "Lessing's long engagement with the question of literary form in fiction has often made her work difficult to categorise and therefore unpopular. Publishers, book sellers and even academics like to be able to make clear distinctions between realism and more 'experimental' texts, between different genres, and between the highbrow/literary and the lowbrow/popular novel" (27). One of the responses to *The Sweetest Dream*, according to Watkins, is that "the blend of autobiography and fiction [was] seen as confusing" (154).

[31] Many a literary theorist has pointed out Lessing's use of structure to convey inner fragmentation. William H. Pritchard, for instance, has argued that "as the sixties wore on and the world in general became (even) more violent, fragmented and unhappy, so did Lessing's fiction" (323). Carole Klein, on the other hand, has maintained that "Lessing's exile from Africa is both physical and a metaphor for other displacements in her life. […]. Unfettered by boundaries, as a writer she has never stayed fixed within any genre, belief system, or locale" (2).

Alfred and Emily into fiction, viz. that it is in their fictionalised form that their actual identity can be found. In what follows I, then, consider to what extent the biography brings across the bona fide Alfred and Emily. Concomitantly I ask whether, in this instance, we should accept the reason given for including fiction in autobiography, or whether there are further indications in the text that it was not so much written out of consideration for Lessing's parents as of being read.

But before I address these issues, it is worth noting that in turning to fiction to portray her parents as they genuinely were Lessing is continuing a tradition initiated by biography writers of the modernist period. In the Introduction it was pointed out that the years around the turn of the twentieth century saw much experimentation with life writing. Virginia Woolf writes about this turning point in literary history in her review of Harold Nicholson's *Some People*. In "The New Biography" she posits that writers like Nicholson helped herald in a new era in biography writing, thus sounding the death knell for the Victorian tradition of hagiography (97-98). According to Woolf, what distinguishes the new biography from its predecessors is "that the author's relation to his subject is different" (97), the modern biographer being less interested in recording (f)acts and deeds than in conveying the "pith and essence of his character" (98). To this end, Woolf suggests that the modern biographer make use of fictional methods (99) and posits that "in order that the light of personality may shine through, facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded" (95). In this way writers might come close to uniting what she calls the "granite-like solidity [of truth]" and the "rainbow-like intangibility [of personality]" (95).

Ira Bruce Nadel has written on the influence Woolf and other literary figures of the modernist period have had on biography writing. In *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*, Nadel points out that by the late twentieth century we had all but shaken the belief that a simple listing of the facts could depict someone's life. Instead of focusing on giving details, Nadel argues biographies now evinced an awareness of their creation, and of the way in which a life was narrated (185-186). More than half a century after Virginia Woolf had first pleaded for the enmeshment of fact and fantasy in order to bring across the "pith and essence of [the subject's] character" (Woolf, "The New Biography" 98), biography writing had reached a point where, according to Nadel, "The 'story' of a life consists of the union between the facts, their imaginative pattern and the linguistic means to present them" (Nadel 178).

By virtue of the fact that it reworks details into an "imaginative pattern" (Nadel 178) in order to bring across Lessing's parents' innermost being, *Alfred & Emily* can be seen as perpetuating the modernist tradition of including fiction in biography in pursuit of truth. At the same time it seems to be in keeping with more recent developments as it is conscious of the fact that it is depicting a life. Lessing creates an awareness of the writing process by informing us right from the outset that "[she has] written [her parents]" (viii). She further shows consideration for how faithfully the past is depicted by touching on the pitfalls and

traps of plying the biographer's trade. She posits that if biography only sticks to facts it will gloss over crucial information:

> I have written about my father in various ways; in pieces long and short, and in novels. He comes out clearly, unambiguous, all himself. One may write a life in five volumes, or in a sentence. How about this? Alfred Tayler, a vigorous and healthy man, was wounded badly in the First World War, tried to live as if he were not incapacitated, illnesses defeated him, and at the end of a shortened life he was begging, 'You put a sick old dog out of its misery, why not me?'
> *This sentence ignores impressive things*. (152, my emphasis)

One detail the above omits is that although Alfred's prosthesis made it burdensome for him to move around, he still completed all his chores on the farm. It also neglects to depict "the slow, then faster descent into serious illness and death" (173). Instead, then, of bringing across the courage Alfred evinced, this "sentence resumé" (153) makes him out to be feeble, and in this way fails to capture the "pith and essence of his character" (Woolf 98). Thus one might say that while it is factual, it is not accurate; while there is no falsehood about it, it does not quite manage to capture the truth of Alfred Tayler.

Lessing, then, appears not only to evince an awareness of the hurdles of biography writing but also seems concerned that her own text might have neglected to take count of the truth. The fear that she might not have brought across Alfred and Emily as they inherently were further comes to the fore when she says that "Writing about parents, even alert offspring or children may miss gold" (*Alfred & Emily* 139). The urge to paint a truthful picture of her mother and father is moreover problematised by the fact that she declares never to have truly been acquainted with them; she says, "For a long time I knew I had never known my father, as he really was, before the war, but it took me years to see that I had not known my mother, as she really was, either" (192). Considering that Lessing further tells us "[she has] written [her parents], as they might have been had the Great War not happened" (viii),[32] one might posit that, to her, the intrinsic Alfred and Emily are not the people she grew up with but the man and woman she created in the biography. Thus it appears that Lessing overcomes the problem of giving a truthful representation of people she never encountered by picturing her parents as they were prior to 1914 and by writing this dreamt-up version of their persons into fiction.

In a short paper entitled "A reissue of *The Golden Notebook*," Lessing says that whilst writing *Under My Skin* and comparing it to happenings and characters as set out in *The Golden Notebook*, she came to the realisation that "fiction is better at 'the truth' than a factual record" (141). What she seems to be suggesting here is that though circumstances may be modified and happenings embellished, fiction allows one to bring across the past. Thus a make-believe tale, such as Alfred and Emily's, might give us the truth while not giving us the

[32] Martin Middeke defines "biofictions" (3) as the type of biography writing in which a life is fictionalised. Further Middeke posits that "Contemporary biofictions may vary individually in the degree to which the novels and plays either comment self-reflexively on the processes of writing, or metabiographically center on the epistemological problem of recounting a life" (3).

truth; that is, it might give us insight into the inner emotions of a person while not giving us an accurate account of the events. Such a text, then, requires us to trust even while not trusting, something which Lessing explicitly alludes to in *Alfred & Emily* when talking about her own childish fantasies:

> And that brings me to the wonderful way children both know and do not know the facts, can believe in a fairy tale with one part of their minds and know it is not true with the other. It is a great, nourishing, saving ability, and if a child doesn't achieve this capacity it may be in trouble. (*Alfred & Emily* 180)

Lessing seems to count on the reader to "both know and [...] not know the facts" (180) when engaging with the fabricated story of her parents. That is to say, though she understands that we understand it is a fictionalised version of their past, she expects that we will repress this for a while so that we will see the actual Alfred and Emily. But there seems to be a problem with this line of reasoning: the entire premise of the fictional biography is that this is what the author *pictures* her parents to have been like "before the war" (192). Their portrayal is, then, based on a conjectured idea of Alfred and Emily. This begs the question to what extent fiction writing can portray the truth of a person if that truth is located in the fantasy life of the biographer herself. Put differently, Lessing intimates that she has written her parents "as [they] really [were]" (192), but how is this possible if she avows she can only conjecture what they inherently must have been like?

This is not to imply, of course, that the fictional depiction of Lessing's parents is not valid, or that it does not give us insight into their person. To be sure, by virtue of the fact that their biography is composed by "alert offspring" (139) it is inevitable that facets of Alfred and Emily will become manifest. While I am not suggesting, then, that their depiction in the biography is unfounded, what I *am* saying is that Lessing's claim to have faithfully portrayed her parents is problematic. Indeed, considering the discussion above, it is my contention that it would be naive to take Lessing's motivation for dabbling in fiction at face value. For this reason, it seems fitting to offer an alternative reading of the fictional biography, and ideally one that concerns the truth of the memoirist herself. In this I am led back to an argument made earlier in the chapter, namely that Lessing's work reveals a more genuine interest in mastering the art of storytelling than it does in bringing across a message or being ethically upright. With this in mind, I want to argue that putting on paper fictional replicas of her mother and father underscores Lessing's proclivity for writing creatively more than it enables her to accurately portray her parents. That is to say, creating the fictional biography allows Lessing to reify that which has thus far been part of her fancy alone. This means that Lessing is now in control, not only of her parents', but also of her own existence since writing allows her to locate herself in the midst of displacement. Concurrently, figures that have long since lived in her head supply the characters she needs to write the fictional biography. Thus the latter deed might be said to gratify what Lessing herself has called "[that] something in us

that needs stories" (Lessing qtd. in Bigsby 84).[33] In short, rather than presenting us with the truth, mixing the factual and the make-believe gives Lessing the means to set down on paper a story that has accompanied her throughout her life and in this way lets her assume, for the very last time, the role of storyteller.

Reflection

In this chapter, I took issue with Lessing's claims for writing *Alfred & Emily*. I suggested that the text undermines the very reasons for its existence, and maintained that there might be a different motivation behind the text than that which Lessing has presented us with. As such, I pointed out the attention the text pays to storytelling as well as foregrounded the idea that spinning a good yarn is more important to Lessing than trying to bring across a message. Subsequently I argued that Lessing writes *Alfred & Emily* not so much because it enables her to grapple with the past or to bring across the bona fide Alfred and Emily but, instead, because it lets her give expression to her creativity as well as gratifies her urge to spin yarns.

It is interesting to note that critics have consistently failed to observe the predominant role of storytelling in *Alfred & Emily*. Tom Sperlinger, for instance, believes the excerpt from *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to be indicative of the fact that the text was written in opposition to the war, and argues that "The First World War is the 'wounding shock' that damages the fictional Chatterley and Mellors and the real-life Alfred and Emily" (66-67).[34] Writing for *The Observer,* Tim Adams seems to concur: "There is another story here, " writes Adams, "a little personal war reparation—both the carnage that shapes nations and families" (par. 10). In similar vein, *The New Yorker* asserts that "In the first half of this unusual blend of fact and fiction, Lessing imagines fulfilled lives for her parents [...] in an England untouched by the First World War" (Acocella 81), and *Literary Review* that conjuring up a life without WWI "is a clever idea, a way of making reparation for terror, injury and loss, and also of examining character, and the fascinating 'what-ifs?' of human destiny" (Norris par. 3).

That readers and reviewers take the writer's assertions at face value leaves one wondering what it is in the text which makes them overlook its internal difference. Why, in other words, do we fail to see the way it subverts its own arguments, and why do we not notice the emphasis it places on storytelling? My suggestion has been that it is exactly because it is told so well that we are drawn in by the text's claims and blinded to what is going on behind the story. Because of the shifty nature of autobiography Lessing is able to conflate different genres. The result is a hotchpotch of fragmented sections which hurls readers out of their

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[33] In "The Need to Tell Stories" Lessing maintains, "We never stop telling ourselves stories. It is the way we structure reality; we tell stories all day, don't we? And when we go to sleep we tell ourselves stories because a dream is a story, maybe sometimes very logical and straightforward and sometimes not, but there is something in us that needs stories" (Lessing qtd. in Bigsby 84).

[34] It is true that Sperlinger concedes "the central premise of Lessing's book [could] be wrong, that it [might not have been] the war, but an idealistic or desperate move to Africa that led to an irrecoverable breakdown in her mother. Lessing also seems naive about her parents' versions of their lives before the war" (68). Sperlinger thus fails to identify storytelling as "the central premise" (68).

acquiescence and forces them to find connections between the different segments themselves. By virtue of the fact that the text disconcerts us, Lessing can be said to use the text's structure to make us identify with the narrator-protagonist and with her feelings of malcontent. In consequence, we do not query her intentions but believe her when she says that she wrote *Alfred & Emily* to undo the war and reinstate her parents. Thus we do not realise what might otherwise be blatantly clear: that the motivation behind the text is not so much the urge "to get out from under [WWI's] monstrous legacy" (viii) as it is to spin (yet) another yarn.

Significantly, the urge to write is integral not only to *Alfred & Emily* but also to the other works discussed in this thesis. All the texts looked at so far have upheld the idea that writing is a way of grappling with the past and/or of rescuing both the living and the dead from the effects of exile and war. Up to now, then, I have exclusively discussed books that see memoir writing as a healing process and as a means of coping with past displacement. In the following and final chapter I continue to explore this topic, and turn my attention to *Youth,* the second installment in J.M. Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy. But while *Youth* certainly thematises the connection between autobiography writing and dislocation, it does not see the writing process as remedial. In contrast to the foregoing texts, the idea expressed in Coetzee's narrative is not that the artist should write in order to shed their agony. Rather, agony is seen as crucial for an artist, and exile as a means of achieving this end. With this in mind I might, then, already now claim that *Youth* portrays distress as a necessary evil in the life of any writer. Succinctly put, it overtly acknowledges that which can only be inferred in Lessing's text: that homelessness and malaise are not feelings that writers of autobiography should discard but, in fact, that these are the things that induce their artistry.

Chapter 5

J.M. Coetzee and the Immanence of *Youth*

> A mouthpiece for the divine. But *sibyl* is not the right word for her. Nor is *oracle*. Too Greco-Roman. His mother is not in the Greco-Roman mould. Tibet or India more like it: a god incarnated in a child, wheeled from village to village to be applauded, venerated.
>
> —J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*

On 3 October 1984, J.M. Coetzee gave his inaugural lecture at the University of Cape Town. As the topic of his lecture, Coetzee selected the problematic nature of autobiographical truth. In the aptly entitled "Truth in Autobiography," Coetzee writes that one way of thinking about the truth in autobiography writing is to see it as an attempt on the part of the autobiographer to understand past events. In order to make sense of the past the writer omits certain aspects of his life (3-4). This, however, does not necessarily mean that the autobiographical truth is compromised; indeed, although trying to understand the past results in "[writing] down an explanation which may be full of gaps and evasions [...] at least [it] gives a representation of the motions of your mind as you try to understand yourself" (4). This suggests that although a life narrative may include distortions and lacunae—and hence not be entirely factual—what autobiography gives us is a glimpse into the struggles played out in the inner life of the subject. Thus we find ourselves "moving into the realm [...] of *authenticity*" and into a sphere where the truth includes "whatever is written in a spirit of sincerity" (4, emphasis original).

In typical Coetzee fashion, the writer goes on, however, to question the notion of sincerity. Speaking of Rousseau's *Confessions*, he asks, "how can we know whether a man who wrote a book two hundred years ago was sincere?" (5). Further he posits,"If we look into its genealogy, does sincerity not begin to look more and more like a concept invented, or elevated to a central position, by Romanticism to privilege certain utterances as *not* having been engendered by rhetoric and therefore as belonging to an art above art?" (5, emphasis original).

To Coetzee, then, we can never get to the truth about the self—an idea which is also expressed in his non-academic writing and especially in his autobiographical trilogy, respectively published as *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1998), *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II* (2002) and *Summertime* (2009).[1] In his memoirs Coetzee namely conflates, to varying degrees, actual happenings from the past with fiction. While the last

[1] In 2011 the three books were published in one volume entitled *Scenes from Provincial Life*.

installment in the trilogy is arguably the furthest removed from Coetzee's personal life (López 244-245), the events described in *Boyhood* and *Youth* greatly coincide with those of the author's past.[2] Thus in *Youth,* the focus of the present chapter, we see the life of the narrator-protagonist, John, roughly following that of the writer: like Coetzee, John is an English-speaking middle-class South African from an Afrikaner family who feels out of place in the family as well as the culture he is born into; like Coetzee, he leaves South Africa to seek fame as a poet in England; and like Coetzee, he finds himself living in exile from 1962-1963, during which time he also works on his Masters thesis. But despite these large overlappings, the protagonist's life story is not wholly in accordance with that of the author: according to Derek Attridge, there are "rather startling omissions and distortions" (*Ethics of Reading* 160) such as the year Coetzee was awarded his M.A. degree, or the detail that he got married in 1963.

Youth, then, is not wholly accurate; put another way, it is "in some sense autobiographical" (Coetzee qtd. in Attwell, "*Autre*-biography" 214)—this, one might argue, not only due to the fact that biography and fiction commingle but also because the style of narration, by virtue of including the third person and present tense, is closer to novel writing than to autobiography writing. In what follows, I argue that by moving between the worlds of fiction and nonfiction, Coetzee comments on the inability of autobiography to reveal the ultimate truth about the subject. At the same time, it foregrounds the self's exilic state and his feelings of displacement. Evidently, as it uses the shifty nature of autobiography in order to underscore the subject's sense of homelessness, *Youth* supports the main contention of this thesis. In this chapter, these aspects of the narrative will then also be discussed in some detail. However, I also argue that Coetzee's memoir appropriates the life writing genre in such a way that it offers an additional argument to those made in previous chapters. In a word, I contend that *Youth* makes a claim for the autobiographical text as an art form that moves between earthly and divine realms, as well as for the life writer as a channel through which higher forces find expression. In consequence thereof, autobiography acquires a more complex ontology than what we have encountered so far,[3] and calls for a modified understanding of the notion which sees it as moving (only) between fact and fiction.

I start off by examining the way in which the question of autobiographical truth is addressed in the text. To this end, I look at the narrator's notion that the nature of autobiography necessitates the enmeshment of real and imagined events, as well as at how these ideas are enacted in the text. I then move on to the claim made above and to the idea that autobiography writing is that which links the material and immaterial world. I tease out the implications of a life narrative that sees itself as occupying a position between different

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[2] In *J.M. Coetzee & the Ethics of Reading* Derek Attridge writes, "*Youth* […] uses the same mode of narration [as *Boyhood*] to recount some of the significant events of [Coetzee's] life between 1959 and 1964 […]" (156); I discuss Coetzee's narrative style in detail in a subsequent section.

[3] With the ontology of the autobiographical genre I mean that which constitutes the nature of autobiography's being, including its shiftiness and its fluid borders.

ontological spheres, and explore the exilic effects of the life writing artist's belief that he is one of the chosen few whose duty it is to mediate between this world and the next.

The life writer's manifesto

In the previous chapter we saw Doris Lessing propounding the idea that auto/biography writing should convey the truth of the person whose life it is depicting, but that it cannot do so by simply reciting the facts. Accordingly, life writers should fictionalise certain aspects of their lives so that the essence of the subject will come through. It is not without significance that a similar kind of philosophising is found in *Youth*. Near the outset of the tale, we see the narrator-protagonist self-reflexively commenting on what it means to write a life after his live-in girlfriend Jacqueline discovers his diary. When Jacqueline reads the unflattering things John has written about their life together, the two lovers have a serious row. This episode makes John consider his reasons for writing hurtful things about Jacqueline, and makes him wonder whether he might have done so because he had *wanted* her to find his diary and in this way learn about his feelings:

> But the real question is, what was his motive for writing what he wrote? Did he perhaps write it in order that she should read it? Was leaving his true thoughts lying around where she was bound to find them his way of telling her what he was too cowardly to say to her face? (9)

The narrator, however, subsequently casts into doubt the idea that taking recourse to life writing has allowed him to tell the truth about himself, and goes on to suggest that his diary might, in fact, not reflect his innermost feelings. This is not only because there is a difference between the one who writes and the one who is written but also because he simply does not know what he really feels. Since John's musings are seminal to his understanding of autobiography writing, they are worth quoting here at length:

> What are his true thoughts anyway?
> […].
> The question of what should be permitted to go into his diary and what kept forever shrouded goes to the heart of all his writing. […]. Besides, who is to say that the feelings he writes in his diary are his true feelings? Who is to say that at each moment while the pen moves he is truly himself? At one moment he might truly be himself, at another he might simply be making things up. How can he know for sure? Why should he even *want* to know for sure?
> *Things are rarely as they seem*: that is what he should have said to Jacqueline. Yet what chance is there she would have understood? How could she believe that what she read in his diary was not the truth, the ignoble truth […] but on the contrary a fiction, one of many possible fictions, true only in the sense that a work of art is true—true to itself, true to its own immanent aims—when the ignoble reading conformed so closely to her own suspicion that her companion did not love her, did not even like her?
> Jacqueline will not believe him, for the simple reason that he does not believe himself. He does not know what he believes. (9-10, emphasis original)

Later in the narrative John returns to the idea that he does not really know what his real thoughts and feelings are. Contemplating the many failed relationships he has had, he says

that "He abominates scenes, angry outbursts, home truths" (132) that mark the end of an affair. Since knowing his real self is something not even *he* is capable of, having someone else tell him the truth about himself is, to his mind, a non-sequitur. He asks, "What is the truth anyway?" and posits that "If he is a mystery to himself, how can he be anything but a mystery to others?" (132).

Because John is "a mystery to himself" (132) his diary cannot depict his true nature. This is why he says that what he writes in his diary is not the truth "but on the contrary a fiction, one of many possible fictions" (10). On the one hand this suggests that the narrated self is not the same as the narrating self; on the other, it implies that besides the flesh-and-blood John there are also imaginary or projected Johns. This split between the narrator's concrete and imagined self(ves) is brought to the fore when he sees himself wearing glasses for the first time and identifies with his ideal ego reflected in the mirror.[4] John alludes to the Baudelairian idea that, as we come into our own, we gradually begin to resemble "our ideal selves" (154), thus intimating that one body can house more than one person:

> We end up looking like our ideal selves, says Baudelaire. The face we are born with is slowly overwhelmed by the desired face, the face of our secret dreams. Is the face in the mirror the face of his dreams, this long, lugubrious face with the soft, vulnerable mouth and now the blank eyes shielded behind glass? (154)

By drawing our attention to the distance between the writing "I" and the written "I," as well as by showing that the subject comprises both a material self and imagined self(ves), *Youth* manages to foreground the protagonist's feelings of fragmentation. Concomitantly, it points out the implications a divided self has for the autobiographical *text:* because the life writer will never be able to depict the truth about himself,[5] it follows that his writing will not be completely factual but that it will inevitably include fictionalised versions of the self. That John is aware of the fact that his memoirs are not empirically true but that he is telling a story about his life that includes different fictions of the self comes to the fore after his botched attempt at having a fun night out with "Marianne from Ficksburg" (127), his cousin Ilse's friend. Thinking about his ignominious treatment of Marianne—whom he shuns after they have sex and she starts bleeding—he says that what he needs to decide is how to reconcile these events with the life he likes to imagine he is leading; he declares, "There

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[4] Dylan Evans's definition of the ideal ego seems particularly apt here. According to Evans, "[t]he ideal ego […] originates in the specular image of the mirror stage; it is a promise of future synthesis towards which the ego tends, the illusion of unity on which the ego is built. The ideal ego always accompanies the ego, as an ever-present attempt to regain the omnipotence of the preoedipal dual relation" (53).

[5] Later in the text the narrator hints at another reason for not writing a factual account of his life, which is that a life story that is merely factual is also dull. Accordingly, the life writer's challenge is to write an affective narrative that is rooted in history. Contemplating William Burchell's travel logs, John declares "he would like to […] write a book as convincing as Burchell's" (138) but that "The difficult part will be to give to the whole the aura that will get it onto the shelves and thus into the history of the world: the aura of truth" (138). He concludes that "The challenge he faces is a purely literary one: to write a book whose horizon of knowledge will be that of Burchell's time, the 1820s, yet whose response to the world around it will be alive in a way that Burchell […] could not be" (138). Writing a story that has a "horizon of knowledge" but that will be "alive" (138) at the same time is, of course, reminiscent of what we saw Virginia Woolf in the previous chapter advocating, namely that the new biographer should combine truth and fiction so that self will come through.

remains the question of what to make of the episode, how to fit it into the story of his life that he tells himself" (130).

The life writer's manifesto in *Youth*, then, upholds the idea that because the autobiographical text portrays the life of a subject that is not fixed, it cannot be completely true but will of necessity combine fact and fiction. Thus one might say that it formulates what we have seen texts in previous chapters perform and/or intimate, namely that the practice of life writing—for different reasons and with different effect—more often than not entails the interaction of the concrete and the imaginary world.[6] What it also does, albeit implicitly, is undergird a point I have made repeatedly in this thesis, viz. that it is by dint of the inherently shifty nature of the life writing genre that authors can effectively depict their dislocated sense of self. Succinctly put, it is precisely because autobiography's borders are not fixed but easily transgressed that life writers have the freedom to conflate fact and fancy, thereby presenting us with fragmented versions of the self that are fictionalised but that contain an element of truth nonetheless.

"*Autre-biography*"[7]

Coetzee's text spells out the necessary interplay of fact and fiction in the autobiography of the divided self. However, it not only sketches but also performs the interaction between the subject's sense of displacement on the one hand and the shiftiness of the life writing genre on the other. This, in the first place, is achieved by skillfully implementing narrative techniques not normally associated with autobiography writing. As has been widely noted, Coetzee narrates his story in the third person (rather than the autobiographical first) and in the present tense (rather than the past), so that the split between the one who writes and the one whose life is being written is foregrounded.[8] While in life narratives there is, admittedly, always a disjuncture between the "I" who writes and the "I" who speaks, what some third-person autobiographies do, as Philippe Lejeune has postulated, is to make this gap explicit:

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[6] As concerns self-reflexive comments regarding the nature of life writing, *Alfred & Emily* arguably offers the closest analogy to *Youth*. An obvious parallel that can be drawn between Coetzee's notion of what it means to write a life and that of Lessing's is that both suggest writing autobiographically *necessarily* entails the entanglement of fact and fiction. Yet whereas Lessing focuses on the uses of fiction to portray the truth of the self, Coetzee foregrounds the idea that autobiography can never tell the truth about the subject as the subject does not know himself what that truth entails. Another difference between these writers is that Lessing presents her ideas on life writing only more than halfway through the book, while Coetzee places his early in the narrative. This allows him not only to signal the centrality of the fact/fiction interplay in *Youth* but also, to use Lejeune's terminology, to present the reader with the terms and conditions of "the autobiographical pact" (*On Autobiography* 13) ere he or she engage in reading the text.

[7] See David Attwell, "All autobiography is *Autre*-biography" (213-218).

[8] Referring to the first of Coetzee's three memoirs, Derek Attridge reminds us of the fact that writing one's life in the historical present and in the third person "is unusual for autobiography" (*Ethics of Reading* 141). Further he cites *The Education of Henry Adams* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as "two obvious precursors" (141) to *Boyhood*. While Attridge does not make any mention of Roland Barthes, I would like to argue that *Roland Barthes* (1975) is another major forerunner to Coetzee's memoirs. Indeed, though the narration in Barthes's text admittedly switches between the first and third person, Coetzee's use of the third-person narrator to portray the fragmented nature of the self—let alone his self-confessed high estimation of Barthes (Clarkson 6)—suggests that his memoir was influenced by Barthes's semi-autobiographical work.

> The first-person [...] always conceals a hidden third person, and in this sense every autobiography is by definition indirect. But in the third-person autobiographies I am going to present, this indirectness is admitted, is boldly proclaimed. ("Autobiography in the Third Person" 32)

In *Youth*, the obvious distance between "I" and "he" makes visible in narrative form the disparity that exists between the different versions of the self. As Coetzee uses elements of fiction writing to depict the estrangement of the subject from himself, he may be said to implement the practice of what he has been wont to call "*Autre*-biography" (Attwell 213), or writing about the self as other. This idea is corroborated in "All autobiography is *Autre*-biography," in which Coetzee goes along with David Attwell's assertions that using the third person to pen his memoirs is an attempt to show the principles of "*Autre*-biography" (213) at work as well as to "achieve greater leverage, possibly extending to the writing subject diagnosing the written subject or protagonist as belonging to a certain historical condition" (216).[9]

Attwell moreover points out that "this kind of self-detachment" (216) allows the writer to treat his younger self with ironical distance. In this he is not alone: Carrol Clarkson claims that using the third person allows Coetzee to separate the two selves at the same time that it "makes for a tone of ironic double perspective, which is surely one of the sources of the humour in the book" (27), and Anna Cichoń that "The tension between [the] two 'I's opens up a dialogue, a negotiation between the younger and older 'version' of the self. The usage of the third person protagonist [...] stresses this distinction: it creates an ironic distance between these two selves [...]" (63).

But effects other than irony have been said to ensue from Coetzee's use of narrative techniques. Margaret Lenta, for instance, has argued that employing the third person in *Youth* has a direct impact on reader response; she posits, "We must [...] assume an intention in the author to weaken the autobiographical pact with the reader who is, like the author, to regard the protagonist's behaviour more objectively than the reader of a first-person autobiography is intended to" (161). Jane Poyner, on the other hand, has claimed that the "presentation of [the] protagonist 'Coetzee' in the third person [is] a device that allows author to distance himself from character in his story and [...] to abnegate responsibility for his actions" (4). Similarly, Laura Wright has argued that it "serves to alienate the author from a self he reluctantly claims as his own while disrupting our notion of authorial and narratorial verisimilitude in the realm of autobiography" (53). Alternatively, Sue Kossew has posited that "By using narrative strategies that draw attention to the constructed nature of writing a life,

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[9] It is not only in his autobiographical writing that Coetzee refers to himself (or a version of himself) in the third person. In the midst of the very last interview he has with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee switches from using "I" to "he" (391-395). According to Carrol Clarkson, "this makes us realize that the stakes are somewhat higher than we might at first have thought: the use of the third person in Coetzee is not only a straightforward matter of linguistic choice which has a distancing effect between narrating voice and narrated consciousness [...] Instead [...] it has to do with questions of the relation between thought and language, of doubtful sites of consciousness within the self, and of the modes of effecting these sites in writing" (23).

[…] Coetzee mobilizes a self-referential autobiographical mode that holds out the promise of intimacy and revelation […] while simultaneously keeping the self at arm's length" (12).

Whatever the angle they have decided to take, critics seem to agree that Coetzee's style of narration draws attention to the split between the diegetic and the extradiegetic subject. What we should not lose sight of here is that subtending the notion of a fragmented self is a book which comprises a mélange of biography and fiction. As intimated before, while the events described in the memoir certainly bear a striking resemblance to those of the author's own life,[10] they are *not* one-to-one. The disparity between author and protagonist foremost reinforces the distance between the concrete and imagined self. But what it also does is to raise questions about the book's generic status, as is evident from the different attempts at emplacing it. Amongst others, *Youth* has been described as a memoir and "quasi-novelistic" (Geertsema 219), as a "hybrid [work inhabiting] the border between fiction and autobiography" (Head 3), and as being situated "outside of any one specific literary genre" (Wright 4).

By dint of the fact that it does not contain a completely factual account of Coetzee's life,[11] *Youth* acts out the very idea it propounds: it performs both the notion that there are different fictions of the self *and* that a life narrative cannot contain the truth about a subject who does not know what that truth entails. That Coetzee has a vested interest in arguing the inability of autobiography to depict the truth is evident not only from his inaugural lecture (which I looked at before) but also from what he has said to David Attwell in *Doubling the Point*:[12]

> […] This massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life […] does it yield only fictions? Or rather, among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, that it yields, are there any that are truer than others? How do I know when I have the truth about myself? (17)

In another interview in the same collection of essays, Coetzee similarly intimates that self-truth is an illusion; he argues, "there is no ultimate truth about oneself, there is no point in trying to reach it, what we call truth is only a shifting self-appraisal whose function is to make one feel good" (*Doubling the Point* 392).[13]

But while shifting the truth might make the writer feel good about himself, Anton Leist and Peter Singer have argued Coetzee's wariness of ultimate truths, and his reluctance to

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[10] *Youth* is not, of course, the first of Coetzee's texts to show similarities between the author's life and that of his characters. Besides obvious points of intersection in *Boyhood* and *Summertime*, it is arguably *Diary of a Bad Year* that stands out from the rest of Coetzee's oeuvre in terms of the amount of resemblances it bears to the writer's past; see Graham Bradshaw (3).

[11] For an overview of the main events in the Coetzee's life, see "J.M. Coetzee—Biography" (*Nobelprize.org*. 4 Dec. 2011).

[12] Coetzee does not only allude to the nature of autobiographical truth here but also in other of his critical works. Carrol Clarkson remarks that "Questions relating to autobiography, confession, authorship and the authority of the writer are at the core of many of [Coetzee's] critical pieces" (21).

[13] Tim Mehigan has argued that as it "[questions] the truth of narration and of the capacity of the writer to speak such truth […] Coetzee's fiction […] betrays several points of contact with postmodernist assumptions about writing" (4). Be that as it may, Coetzee (as I point out later in the chapter) has been more closely aligned with late modernism than with postmodernism.

provide any in his work, has the opposite effect on his *readers*. "Readers," they maintain, "feel uneasy once the authorial normative guidance is drawn away and frequently feel angry at being offered only vague hints of how to begin a treatment of the problem at hand: how to situate oneself in relation to elementary questions of life and living" (7). This sense of unease on the part of the reader is further compounded by the fact that *Youth* resists generic classification, as I have shown above.[14] In this respect, Derek Attridge reports that many a reader (and reviewer) has failed to recognise the autobiographical undercurrent of the book, and hence to see its value. Attridge writes that as *Youth* implements the third person and the present tense—in our terms, devices commonly associated with fiction—it has often been read and judged as a novel and, as such, found to be lacking in plot (156-157).[15] Considering the generic uncertainty *surrounding* the text as well as the absence of truth *in* the text, it is not difficult to see why Coetzee's memoir might fail to gratify its readers—or how it might make us sit uncomfortably and subject us to a malaise not too unlike that of the protagonist.

In the Introduction we saw how literary theorists in the 1970s brought together the inherently alienating nature of the autobiographical genre and the subject's exilic state. They postulated, as might be recalled, that in autobiography writing there exists, of necessity, a discrepancy between the narrating and narrated self, as well as between the writer's past depicted in the text and his life in the present and concrete world. Because autobiography so to say demands a split between the writing "I" of the present and the textual "I" of the past, they argued that life narratives cannot be completely accurate. In this section I argued that these ideas resurface in *Youth*; more specifically, I pointed out how the text not only suggests but also performs the notion that the subject is made up of different selves and how, as a result, his or her life story can never contain any ultimate truths.

Though it is certainly not uninteresting to note that Coetzee's narrative plays with the shiftiness of the autobiographical mode to conflate the factual and the fictitious and so act out the subject's separation from itself, this has been so extensively commented on that it runs the risk of becoming banal.[16] Added to that the author's endeavour to resist imposing a definitive interpretation on his work as well as his interest in getting the reader to produce

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[14] That Coetzee tried to resist categorisation is clear from the correspondence he had with his publisher. JC Kannemeyer writes that "In the US, *Youth* was, as the subtitle indicates, marketed as a novel, whereas in the UK the title was published without any indication as to genre. In this regard Coetzee exchanged e-mails with Geoff Mulligan, at the time head of Secker & Warburg. […] Coetzee writes on 23 July 2001: […] if I absolutely have to choose between categorizing the book as fiction or as autobiography, I would go for the for the former; but the less absolute the categorization, from my point of view, the better " (509-510).

[15] In a footnote Attridge adds that a reason why critics might have had difficulty in identifying the book's genre was that "prepublication copies were sent out with an accompanying note that implied the work was a novel" (*Ethics of Reading* 157). Attridge further points out that whereas in the States "the book appeared with the subtitle *Scenes from Provincial Life II*, which made its connection with *Boyhood* clear" (156), this was not the case in Britain. Dominic Head has also written about the circumstances surrounding the book's publication. These include "the publisher's categorization of the work as 'fiction', and […] the blurb that, in contrast to the dust jacket of *Boyhood*, makes no reference to Coetzee's own life" (9).

[16] María López writes, "Compared with other works by Coeztee, both *Boyhood* and *Youth* have received few critical responses, and attention has been almost exclusively directed at their autobiographical character, in particular to the peculiar effects of the third-person, present-tense narration in relation to the overall confessional tone" (219).

his or her own reading of the text,[17] it seems only apt, in a critical study on Coetzee, to go beyond this type of "obvious" observation. With this in mind, and considering that conflating fact and fiction in memoir writing so as to underscore the subject's sense of displacement has been discussed at length in connection with works looked at before, in what follows I will ask what Coetzee's text has to add to our understanding of the autobiographical genre. To do so, I return to the life writer's manifesto in *Youth* and argue that there is more here than initially meets the eye. More specifically, I claim that there is another level of ontology to be discerned besides the factual and the imaginary, and that the text's oscillation between these different spheres provides a *mise en abyme* of the protagonist's movement between the different worlds he inhabits, thereby underlining his sense of dislocation.

Immanence

In a close reading of the protagonist's declaration of what it means to write a life, one notion stands out from the rest: the idea that autobiography might be "true only in the sense that a work of art is true—true to itself, true to its own immanent aims" (10). From this we might infer three distinct characteristics of autobiography: it is a work of art, it is true to itself, it is true to its immanent aims. The upshot of such a declaration is, in the first place, to elevate autobiography's literary status: it is not just any piece of writing—and most certainly not the unwanted stepchild of the literary world—[18] but art. Secondly, according to the narrator, that his diary, i.e. a piece of life writing, is "true to itself" equates to its being "true to its own immanent aims" (10). Now, "immanent aims" is an interesting choice of words and warrants our closer attention, lest we overlook a material point the text is trying to make about the practice of autobiography writing.

In his critical essays, Coetzee has referred to the importance of including—and getting the reader to notice—a specific word in a text. In an interview with David Attwell, he has intimated that one of the things that drew him to the work of Ford Madox Ford was

> the aesthetics of *le mot juste*. Which is not to say that when I myself write I do not quite laboriously search out the right word. (*Doubling the Point*, 20)

In "Homage," published in 1993, Coetzee returns to the idea of *le mot juste*, this time invoking Ezra Pound. In his paper, Coetzee expounds on how the writer might decelerate the reading process in order to make the reader pay due attention to his choice of words—something, he says, he learnt from Pound:

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[17] In an interview with the Zurich Newspaper *NZZ,* Coetzee has expressed his reluctance to analyse his own books in public. Instead of telling readers what a work means, he feels they should produce their own interpretation of the text at hand (Schader par. 2).

[18] Stephen A. Shapiro's claim in 1968 that "Autobiography has been unjustifiably ignored by contemporary literary critics, who tend to assume that it is not a form of 'imaginative' literature" (421) is indicative of the fact that autobiography used to be regarded as less literary than fictional works.

> The reader who reads too fast is bound to miss something, often the best thing [...] what I as a writer learned about slowing down the reading eye didn't come from Joyce or Faulkner. It came, rather, from the principle, if not the body of techniques, followed by Pound. That principle is broadly rhythmical. By disposing the text in blocks or patches over the page, by interspersing the text with odd-looking words in odd-looking orthography (Greek, Chinese), above all by getting the voice into the line, Pound makes possible the moment of the exact word, the word which the eye pauses over, takes in, absorbs, makes his own. (6)

In light of the above, and keeping in mind the discipline and meticulousness with which Coetzee has been said to work (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 394; Huggan and Watson 10), it seems only fitting that we let our eye pause over the words of the life writer's manifesto in *Youth* and reflect on how its having immanent aims might inform our understanding of the text. The *O.E.D.* provides us with two definitions of the word "immanent": "existing or operating within; (of God) permanently pervading the universe." Assuming the first of these meanings to be the narrator's intention, one might postulate that he is suggesting a life narrative is created in the artist's mind and that it is the result of his or her imaginative faculty. However, "immanent" in the sense of "existing or operating within" might also suggest that an autobiographical piece is an autonomous entity, and that it exists for no other purpose than for its own sake.[19] Such a reading would support the idea that, as a work of art, life writing is true to itself and hence an end in itself. This would, of course, also fit in neatly with the argument presented in the section above, for if autobiography is designed and developed in the mind of the writer, and if it requires no other merit than being a creative work in its own right, it *cannot* be completely factual but but must of necessity include imaginative elements.

While the above provides us with a perfectly acceptable reading of the manifesto, and while it underscores the claims made before, it nonetheless does not *add* anything to our understanding of the shifty nature of autobiography, or of how it reinforces displacement. Indeed, in the context of this thesis, such an interpretation simply does not seem satisfying enough. In the hope of uncovering a more profound truth about life writing, I would like to turn my attention to the other meaning of "immanent," i.e. to the idea that something (godly) permanently permeates the world. Here, however, I am immediately led to ask why the omnipresence of a presumably divine force might be invoked in a philosophical paragraph on life writing. What, in other words, could the link be between the ubiquitous presence of a higher power on the one hand and the life writer and his work on the other? One clue to unravelling the connection between immanence and the practice of autobiography writing is found in the depiction of the artist (including the autobiographical artist) as having an elevated status among men. That artists generally occupy a higher position can be discerned from the fact that a distinction is made between artists and ordinary people. A case in point is

[19] This notion of art for art's sake is, of course, reminiscent of the ideals of Romanticism (which, in turn, sprang out of the French Revolution) and especially of the notion that "the whole point of 'creative' writing was that it was gloriously useless, an 'end in itself' loftily removed from any sordid social purpose" (Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 18). We return to Romanticism, and to its influence on the narrator, later in this section.

the narrator's assertion that, unlike common folk, artists need time to be by themselves and to reflect. This comes to the fore when John wonders whether the reason "the affair with Jacqueline was doomed to fail [was] because, not being an artist herself, she could not appreciate the artist's need for inner solitude" (11). Another characteristic which the narrator believes distinguishes the artist from mere man[20] is the fact that they do not acquiesce to society's idea of what is right and wrong; accordingly he tells us, "artists do not have to be morally admirable people. All that matters is that they create great art" (30). He moreover posits that it is not possible for them to belong completely to the earthly realm:

> Normal people find it hard to be bad. […]. Badness is to them like a fever: they want it out of their system, they want to go back to being normal. But artists have to live with their fever, whatever its nature, good or bad. The fever is what makes them artists; the fever must be kept alive. That is why artists can never be wholly present to the world: one eye has always to be turned inward. (30-31)

The schism that exists between man and artist is reinforced by the contention that the latter is one of an elect few. Indeed, the narrator is at pains to point out that though there are many who aspire to become artists, only some are selected; he declares, "Many are called, few are chosen. For every major poet a cloud of minor poets, like gnats buzzing around a lion" (20). That he believes he is one of the elect himself is evident when he tells us about "the secret flame burning in him, the flame that marks him as an artist" (5), and when he says that "transmuting experience into art [is] the work for which he was brought into the world" (44).

Despite his conviction that he is preordained to be an artist, John nonetheless becomes increasingly concerned that he might *not* succeed in fulfilling his aesthetic destiny. Initially these fears are only hinted at, as when he asserts that "Whether he will turn out to be a great artist only time will tell" (11). Later, however, he begins to express his misgivings more openly. After spending many fruitless months trying to write poetry, he declares "He wishes it could be granted to him to come alive and just for a minute, just for a second, know what it is to burn with the sacred fire of art" (66). He wonders whether it might be because he is conceivably "dull and ordinary" (116) that he is prevented from experiencing artistic inspiration, and whether the fact that he lacks passion in life might hinder him from becoming a true artist; he asks, "if the lovemaking he is familiar with […] is either anxious or bored or both anxious and bored—does it mean that he is not a real artist […]?" (67).

John, then, considers whether he might have misjudged his own potential and whether he might be meant to lead a life of bourgeoisie instead of a higher existence. Greatly distressed he asks, "Is that his problem […] that all the time he has been overestimating his worth on the market, fooling himself into believing he belongs with sculptresses and actresses when he

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[20] Though *man* here is used in the sense of *one* and not to designate sex, it needs to be pointed out that John believes that artists are, really, men and not women. He is moreover of the opinion that this inequality between the sexes results in a type of penis envy; he tells us, "Women themselves do not have the sacred fire (there are exceptions: Sappho, Emily Brontë). It is in quest of the fire they lack, the fire of love, that women pursue artists and give themselves to them" (66).

really belongs with the kindergarten teacher on the housing estate or the apprentice manageress of the shoe store?" (150). But no sooner does he toy with the idea of accepting an ordinary life than he decides "He is not going to give in, not yet" (150)—a decision which might very well have to do with the fact that there is one occasion when he is given an inkling of what it is like to be inspired by something outside of the self. Out for a walk in Hampstead Heath one day, John lies himself down on the grass and quickly dozes off:

> [He] sinks into a sleep or half-sleep in which consciousness does not vanish but continues to hover. It is a state he has not known before: in his very blood he seems to feel the steady wheeling of the earth. The faraway cries of children, the birdsong, the whirr of insects gather force and come together in a paean of joy. His heart swells. *At last!* he thinks. At last it has come, the moment of ecstatic unity with the All! Fearful that the moment will slip away, he tries to put a halt to the clatter of thought, tries simply to be a conduit for the great universal force that has no name. (117, emphasis original)

The description of his experience in the park attests to the strong influence that the Romantic movement has had on John, especially the idea of immanence. The latter was, of course, a notion popularised by Wordsworth during the Romantic period.[21] Alluding to a study on the way in which Wordsworth's beliefs were appropriated by American poets during the 1960s, Ben Hickman quotes Charles Altieri's understanding of immanence as the poet's belief that his writing shows "the action of disclosure rather than of creating order […]" (60). Hickman adds that, according to Altieri, reviving the idea of immanence in postmodern poetics entails returning to "the insistence that the moment immediately and intensely experienced can restore one to harmony with the world and provide ethical and psychological renewal" (60). From the aforementioned one might infer that John buys into the concept of Romantic immanence: he tells us his experience in the park puts him in "unity with the All" and that it momentarily transforms him into "a conduit for the great universal force that has no name" (117). This leads him to believe that he might not be an ordinary person after all but an artist with special powers and privileges, among which that he is at one with the universe and a channel through which higher forces find expression.

In "Coetzee's Artists: Coetzee's Art" Derek Attridge writes about the portrayal of the artist and his role in Coetzee's work. According to Attridge, one notion that is expressed is that he or she is an instrument for a higher force.[22] In *Elizabeth Costello*, for instance, John—son of

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[21] In his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (1802), Wordsworth talks about a "sublime notion of Poetry which [he has] attempted to convey " (607). While, to Wordsworth, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (611), the poet is someone who has a "divine spirit" (607) and who possesses "a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind" (603). Wordsworth adds, however, that "the Poet must descend from this supposed height, and, in order to excite rational sympathy, he must express himself as other men express themselves" (608).

[22] While not wanting to equate the protagonist with the writer, it is nonetheless interesting to note what Coetzee has said about the role of the artist, and how this underscores the ideas presented above. In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee asserts that "duty can be of two kinds: it can be an obligation imposed on the writer by society […] or it can be something constitutional to the writer, what one might loosely call conscience but what I would tentatively prefer to call an imperative, a transcendental imperative" (*Doubling the Point* 340). Further he says that "If I am closer to Breytenbach than to Gordimer […] it is […] because Breytenbach accepts more easily than Gordimer that stories finally have to tell themselves, that the hand that holds the pen is only the conduit of a signifying process" (341).

the eponymous protagonist—calls his mother and world-renowned author "a mouthpiece for the divine" (Coetzee qtd. in Attridge 32).[23] Attridge adds, however, that the text suggests this need not be a benevolent force and posits "if the artist can be touched by a god, he or she can also be brushed by the leathery wing of the devil" (32). Other novels by Coetzee which Attridge identifies as establishing a connection between artistry and divinity include *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) and *Disgrace* (1999):[24]

> In both novels, the connection between the aesthetic and the erotic is profound [...] both forces take one unawares, as if touched by a god, and lead one into unknown territory, for good or ill. As in *Youth*, Coetzee leaves us in no doubt that this trope can be an excuse for irresponsible and selfish behaviour, but it also seems the only way to understand the forces at work in desire and artistic invention. (37)

A book which does not appear on the list, but which one might want to add, is *In the Heart of the Country* (1976). Here we find Magda, the narrator and recorder of events, not only drawing our attention to her ability as a lyricist on the one hand and her shortcomings as a storyteller on the other, but also linking her function as poet to the idea of divinity:

> My talent is all for immanence, for the fire or ice of identity at the heart of things. Lyric is my medium, not chronicle. (71)

What Magda is doing—besides suggesting that she is more interested in disclosure than in a chronological rendition of events—is to make a connection between the artist and his or her work. With this in mind we might go back to the life writer's manifesto in *Youth* and argue the notion that what is true for any work of art is also true for life writing means, by extension, that what is true for all artists is also true for the autobiographical artist. This equation of life writer and artist on the one hand, and the linking of the autobiographer and his work on the other, is important since (as might be gleaned from the foregoing) these distinctions become somewhat blurred as the narrative progresses. Because much of what is said in *Youth*, then, appears to pertain to artists and their work in general, we need to remind

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[23] It is not without significance that Coetzee chooses a text in which the protagonist is conceivably his alter ego to express the idea that the artist is a channel for a higher force, nor that he picks a character who shares his first name to make this claim.

[24] Another novel in which the writer is linked with the divine is *Diary of a Bad Year*. As Christ Danta points out in "The Melancholy Ape," the main character's initials "JC [are] not just of John Coetzee but also of Jesus Christ" (129). In Coetzee's most recent work, *Childhood of Jesus*, such divinity is not only invoked in the title but also in the type of language used. According to Joyce Carol Oates, Coetzee's narrative is marked by "uniformly plain, flat, unadorned prose" (par. 9). As indicated before, this is in agreement with the Romantic idea that though the poet is elevated among man, "he must express himself as other men express themselves" (Wordsworth 608). While Oates does not remark on this particular connection with Romanticism, she does relate the text to Wordsworth in other ways when she argues that "[the child] David would seem to be a symbol in the author's imagination of 'childness' in the Romantic, Wordsworthian sense—that is, the child as close to God" (par. 19). As concerns the fictional setting Novilla, Oates writes it is "a sketchily imagined, fictitious place that might well be a bare, Beckett stage on which actors are reading scripts they don't fully understand, at the bequest of a director who remains elusive and seems to have relinquished the very responsibility of direction" (par. 21). With this in mind, I want to develop Oates's ideas and posit that the director here is the author, J(M)C, and that it is him to whom David is attached—that it is him whom Simón has in mind when he says, "I wish someone, some savior would descend from the skies" (Coetzee qtd. in Oates par. 21).

ourselves of the autobiographer's manifesto and of the fact that the claims are first made in connection with the autobiographical genre.

As it is not any type of manifesto but one on life writing which has been chosen to convey the idea that art is the means by which "the great universal force" (117) is manifested in the world, and as this claim is not made in any work of art but in an autobiographical text, it is my contention that *Youth* elevates autobiography as the art form par excellence. This idea finds further corroboration in the fact that the diarist's manifesto suggests a life narrative might be seen as a channel for divine energies on two accounts. First, as autobiography is designated a work of art it is immanent in and of itself. But seeing that the life of the diegetic subject is, at the very least, based on that of the autobiographer—who, in turn, is an instrument through which higher forces find expression—it is also immanent in its content. Thus one might postulate that, as far as the manifesto is concerned, an autobiographical work is immanent both in its capacity as object (the text) and in its choice of subject matter (the writer). As such, life writing epitomises that which John believes all great art should aspire to: the ability to remain "true to its own immanent aims" (10).

"Suffering, madness, sex"[25]

Because *Youth* depicts life writing as an immanent art form that conflates fact and fiction, it presents us with a more complex ontology of the autobiographical genre than the texts hitherto looked at. Indeed, being attributed the capacity of speaking for a higher authority does not merely reinforce but *compounds* autobiography's exilic nature. That is, we can no longer see autobiography as a fundamentally homeless genre only by virtue of the fact that it comprises a mix of fact and fiction, but also because it is a means by which higher forces make their presence felt in the material world.

Vacillating between the material and immaterial world enhances the elusive quality of autobiography writing in general and thus also of Coetzee's narrative. At the same time, as will presently become clear, it underscores the protagonist's sense of displacement.[26] In order to understand how John's homelessness might be mirrored in the shiftiness of the text, we need to remind ourselves of his desire to be a mouthpiece for a greater force—a desire which entails making the passage from being a man to being an artist. In order to make this transition, the narrator believes he has to pass a test. As he does not know what this test consists of but can only speculate, he is constantly on the lookout for signs:

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[25] J.M. Coetzee, *Youth* 66

[26] Moving between the earthly and celestial world in order to convey a sense of dislocation is also very much the case in the aforementioned *Childhood of Jesus*. Novilla, the land where refugees Simón and David arrive when the narrative starts, is situated somewhere between the everyday and the supernatural. According to Hedley Twidle, "The name Novilla captures the mixture of newness and nowhere that resides in literary utopias […] we are left uncertain about whether this is a brave new world or else a worryingly centralized and even sinister dictatorship of the people" (par. 4).

> […] how can one write when tiredness is like a gloved hand gripping one's brain and squeezing? Or is what he likes to call tiredness in fact a test, a disguised test, a test he is moreover failing? After tiredness, are there further tests to come, as many as there are circles in Dante's Hell? Is tiredness simply the first of the tests that the great masters had to pass, Hölderlin and Blake, Pound and Eliot? (66)

John contemplates whether the difficulties he faces as an aspiring writer, such as lacking the energy to write, are a way of assessing his artistic staying power. The fear that he might fail the test accompanies him throughout the narrative. After a particularly trying time in London he tells us "He is in the vale of testing and not doing very well" (114). Then, just a few pages before the story ends, he expresses his concern that "One might cease to be able to respond to the call when it comes, might become too weak, too abject" (166). At the same time, he realises that all true artists have to pass the test before they can enter the realm of art and become a channel for some greater power:

> […] he cannot be the only one to be tested. There must be people who have passed through the vale and come out on the other side; there must be people who have dodged the test entirely. He too could dodge the test if he preferred. He could run away to Cape Town, for instance, and never come back. But is that what he wants to do? Surely not, not yet. (114)

John says that the testing he is subjected to is something all artists experience, and that if he wants to become one himself he cannot give up but that he must stay the course. Maintaining that what he is going through is something all artists are made to endure gives John hope and makes him persevere in his quest for artistic immanence. What it also does is to align him with some of the greatest writers of the Western world. This, however, is only one of the ways in which John manages to associate himself with iconic figures of the past; another is by imitating the type of life they led. A case in point is when, still in South Africa, he thinks about what he will do when he gets to London. He tells us "Since great artists are fated to go unrecognized for a while, he imagines he will serve out his probationary years as a clerk humbly adding up columns of figures in a back room" (22). In addition he maintains that living on bread, soup, fruit, milk and cheese is "a diet Rousseau would approve of, or Plato" (3), and claims that "There is no dishonour in electing to follow Eliot and Stevens and Kafka. His choice is to wear a black suit like they did, wear it like a burning shirt, exploiting no one, cheating no one, paying his way" (60).

But it is not only in the way he dresses or in the food he eats that John sees similarities between his own life and that of "the great masters" (66)—he also believes he has an artistic temperament comparable to theirs, even if there are some differences. Thus, though he admits to being "quieter, gloomier, more northern" (11) than Picasso he is not concerned for "Writers are not like painters anyway: they are more dogged, more subtle" (11). While he further realises that "warmth is not in his nature" he adds that "Poetry is not written out of warmth anyway. Rimbaud was not warm. Baudelaire was not warm" (168). Then there are artists besides the French Symbolist poets that the narrator feels an affiliation with: he tells

us that "his imagination is of the same colour as Brodsky's" (91), posits that "Beckett is classless, or outside class, as he himself would prefer to be" (155), and says that when the day comes "a torrent of pent-up verse on the pattern of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*" (52) will be released.

Youth opens with the epigraph "Wer den Dichter will verstehen/muß in Dichters Lande gehen," taken from Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* (1819). In light of the fact that the narrator goes to great lengths to draw parallels between his own life and that of his literary idols, one might say that these initial lines prefigure not only his (undesired) attachment to South Africa (a point I return to later) but also his need to be associated with artists and their world —a need that takes us back to a point made above, namely that he believes it is only by being tested that he can become an artist. Although he does not know exactly what the test will consist of, he does know that it will entail being subjected to misery and despair. He moreover believes that there is a triad of means by which one can become an artist:

> Suffering, madness, sex: three ways of calling down the sacred fire upon oneself. (66)

It might be remembered from the previous chapter that Doris Lessing believes the artist's creative energy is unleashed when he or she is touched with fire. But while the fire Lessing is moved by is ostensibly that of war, the narrator in Coetzee's text—in the age-old Western literary tradition of the "tortured artist"—[27] believes it is through the trials and tribulations that accompany either hardship, insanity or lovemaking that one can "[call] down the sacred fire upon oneself" (66) and come into one's own as a writer. In the course of the narrative John accordingly investigates these three means as ways of achieving literary stardom. Of the paths available to him, insanity is the one to which he pays the least attention. One of the reasons for this is that he doubts the efficacy of mental instability to induce creativity—he tells us the person he knew who came the closest to being insane was Jacqueline and she, he says, never "[blazed] with the divine and exhilarating fire of creativity" (66). Another reason is that he purportedly dislikes the fanfare that often accompanies the image of the insane artist. Hence, if insanity *were* to to be his fate, he says he would not relish it like artists did in the past, but that he would suffer it in style:

> In the Romantic era artists went mad on an extravagant scale. Madness poured out of them in reams of delirious verse or great gouts of paint. That era is over: his own madness, if it is to be his lot to suffer madness, will be otherwise—quiet, discreet. He will sit in a corner, tight and hunched, like the robed man in Dürer's etching, waiting patiently for his season in hell to pass. And when it has passed he will be all the stronger for having endured. (60)

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[27] In her paper "Mental Illness and Creativity: A Neurological View of the 'Tortured Artist'" Adrienne Sussman writes that "As far back as the 4th century B.C., the connection between 'divine' inspiration and altered mental state had already been made" (21). Sussman further points out that "The idea was especially powerful for the Romantic artists, who self-consciously embraced the image [of the tortured artist]" so that in order "To be a serious artist, one needed to be 'touched'" (21).

Albeit not the way the Romantics did it, John says that he would like to endure his ordeal, when it comes, with little emotional display. Thus, while "A century ago poets deranged themselves with opium and alcohol so that from the brink of madness they could issue reports on their visionary experiences" (59), he tells us he would prefer to be tested in another way. Indeed, he sees no reason why he cannot reach the same echelons of artistic excellence but by entirely different means:

> Opium and alcohol are not his way, he is too frightened of what they might do to his health. But are exhaustion and misery not capable of performing the same work? Is living on the brink of psychic collapse not as good as living on the brink of madness? Why is it a greater sacrifice, a greater extinction of personality, to hide out in a garret room on the Left Bank for which you have not paid the rent, or wander from café to café, bearded, unwashed, smelly, bumming drinks from friends, than to dress in a black suit and do soul-destroying office-work and submit to either loneliness unto death or sex without desire? (59)

The narrator is disinclined to suffer from insanity in order to gain access into the sacred world of art; this, he says, is "not his way" (59). As "living on the brink of madness" (59), then, is not a real option and as it is paid scant attention in the text, in what follows I will focus on the other two ways in which the protagonist believes he might be made to endure misery, i.e. either by being subjected to "sex without desire" or "loneliness unto death" (59). I begin by paying attention to the latter type of testing and consider the ways in which John, in a manner reminiscent of his literary idols, is made to experience alienation. At the same time that this will shed light on the connection between his desire to become an artist and his sense of displacement, it will bring me to the other trajectory of this thesis and find my way to exile.

Outcast

The narrator-protagonist in *Youth* believes that, like all successful artists, he too will be put to the test in order to gain access to the realm of art and produce immanent work. Further he believes that this will inevitably involve suffering and pain; he tells us, "Misery is a school for the soul. From the waters of misery one emerges on the far bank purified, strong, ready to take up again the challenges of a life of art" (65). Derek Attridge has suggested that John's ideas about artistry are not, however, to be taken at face value. He argues that "[t]he conception of the artist that dominates *Youth* […] is not one we are invited to endorse" and posits that "the irony in Coetzee's use of hackneyed Romantic rhetoric—though not evident to his young protagonist—cannot be mistaken by the reader" ("Coetzee's Artists" 29). This includes the notion that passion will unleash the writer's imaginative energy as well as the idea that the work of some artists are to be disregarded based on the opinion of poets John idolises (29). But while Attridge's reasoning is astute, the point is that the irony is precisely *not* evident to the young narrator. Since John, then, does not have the hindsight of his older and wiser self, he believes being subjected to misery will help him become an artist.

Accordingly he expresses his desire to experience "a taste of Angst" (49) and his intention to avoid happiness at all cost:

> In fact he would not dream of going into therapy. The goal of therapy is to make one happy. What is the point of that? Happy people are not interesting. Better to accept the burden of unhappiness and try to turn it into something worthwhile, poetry or music or painting: that is what he believes. (13-14)

Because he thinks being miserable will assist him in becoming an artist, John might be said to desire misfortune.[28] Hence, in contrast to the other autobiographical texts dealt with in this thesis, the subject does not profess to produce a narrative so as to come to terms with his pain but, instead, suggests that suffering is needed in order to be creative in the first place. Based on the lives of writers and poets he admires, he moreover posits that this holds true for artists in general; he tells us, "If for the time being he must be obscure and ridiculous, that is because it is the lot of the artist to suffer obscurity and ridicule until the day when he is revealed in his true powers and the scoffers and mockers fall silent" (3). As examples of artists who were afflicted by anonymity and alienation, but who were able to turn these experiences into art, he mentions Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot:

> Ezra Pound has suffered persecution most of his life: driven into exile, then imprisoned, then expelled from his homeland a second time. […]. Obeying his daimon, Pound has sacrificed his life to his art. So has Eliot, though Eliot's suffering has been of a more private nature. Eliot and Pound have lived lives of sorrow and sometimes of ignominy. There is a lesson for him in that […]. Like Pound and Eliot, he must be prepared to endure all that life has stored up for him, even if that means exile, obscure labour and obloquy. (19-20)

The narrator says that if poets like Eliot and Pound were made to experience isolation, hardship and ill repute he must expect to forbear no less. In voicing his desire to emulate the exilic condition of writers like Eliot and Pound, John calls attention to the way modernism has shaped his thinking. Thus he manages to align himself with modernist artists as well as modernist ideology. As María López has noted

> […] modernism, the literary paradigm which the young John feels closest to, probably constitutes one of the clearest glorifications of the exiled condition—the breaking of ties with nation, family, home, and ethnicity—as the path leading to intellectual freedom and artistic creation […] (232)

In keeping with modernism's idea that living in exile can spark the artist's creative imagination, John states his readiness to endure alienation. The irony is of course that he is

[28] Not only does John feel he needs to endure hardship in order to become an artist but he also seems to enjoy the pain that it brings along. Significantly, it is the narrator himself who draws our attention to this need of his as when he asks, "Does he want to be made unhappy? Is that what unhappiness has become for him: a drug he cannot do without?" (70), or when he avers that "Misery is his element. He is at home in misery like a fish in water. If misery were to be abolished, he would not know what to do with himself" (65). The idea that melancholy might be desirable and unappealing at the same time invokes Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). In "The Author's Abstract of Melancholy," Burton writes that of all his pleasures there are "Naught so sweet as melancholy" (l.8), and that of all his displeasures there are "Naught so sad as melancholy" (l.16).

already in a state of exile, and this on account of more than one reason. I have been pointed out before that John is internally fragmented and hence alienated from himself. Further it might be recalled that he professes to be made up of a number of fictions and not to know what his real self really looks like. Besides being a stranger to himself, John also feels alienated from his contemporaries: because he thinks of himself as belonging to an elite group of artists who produces immanent work, a divide exists between him and ordinary people. This condition of being an outsider is especially evident when he is among his peers, as can be gathered from the way he describes his feelings when traversing the streets of London:

> Of the throng on the sidewalks, most are young people. Strictly speaking he is their contemporary, but he does not feel like that. He feels middle-aged, prematurely middle-aged: one of those bloodless, high-domed, exhausted scholars whose skin flakes at the merest touch. (56)

In a way uncannily reminiscent of Roland Barthes who, as might be recalled from the Introduction, realises with sudden clarity that he is an outcast when he one day observes a bourgeois wedding, the narrator in *Youth* understands that as an artist he is different from other people, and that he does not belong with his peers.[29] Being estranged from himself and his contemporaries are not the only ways in which John is made to experience a sense of alienation, though, for he also feels exceedingly out of place at home. To be sure, John is not only ill at ease around his parents but ostensibly *wants* to be alienated from them. A case in point is his determination not be like his father: he tells us that the reason he will neither stop working on his Master's thesis nor relinquish his dream of becoming an artist—no matter how tough the going might get—is that "Giving up undertakings is his father's way. He is not going to be like his father" (136). It is, of course, precisely because he disapproves so strongly of his father that his greatest fear is that he will turn out like him, a fear which comes to the fore not long after he resigns from his position as computer programmer at IBM. In order to get a job as a house-sitter and provide some much needed cash, John lies about being employed. But because it turns out that he is not the only occupant of the house, he cannot stay at home during the day but has to make as if he is going to work. To kill time, he spends his days in museums, bookstores, public parks and at the movies. But loitering around like this does not turn out to be quite as harmless as initially thought, for it gets John thinking and makes him consider whether he and his father are not cut from the same cloth after all:

[29] At the same time there are intimations that John will not feel at home in any community, not even if it comprises like-minded artists. This inability to fit in with the artistic community becomes apparent when John decides to join the Poetry Society. After he ends up having dispassionate sex with one of the Society's members, he stops attending their meetings. This not only because relations between him and the girl have become awkward but also because he admits "He has never felt welcome there anyway" (74).

> This must have been more or less how his father lived during the long spells when he was out of work: roaming the city in his office clothes or sitting in bars watching the hands of the clock, waiting for a decent hour to go home. Is he after all going to turn out to be his father's son? How deep does it run in him, this strain of fecklessness? Will he turn out to be a drunkard too? (122-123)

For fear of becoming a "drunkard" (123) and of "fecklessness" (122), John wants to dissociate himself from his father. Albeit for different reasons, he also wants to distance himself from his mother. This foremost has to do with his desire to be independent and her desire not to let go; he says, "All his life she wanted to coddle him; all his life he has been resisting" (18). The first indication of John's conscious decision to oppose his mother is when he makes up his mind to move away from home and to see his parents as little as possible. While he knows that excluding them from his life is causing especially his mother great distress, he says he that "He must harden his heart against her. Now is not the time to let down his guard" (18). It is then also (among other reasons) in order to put as much distance as possible between him and his mother that John leaves South Africa. But while the narrator hopes that going to London will make his mother comprehend that he wants to be free from her and that he wants to sever all ties with his family, he soon discovers that not even the length and breadth of a continent can induce her to cut him loose:

> Each week a letter arrives from his mother […]. It is with exasperation that he receives these evidences of her unchanging love for him. Will his mother not understand that when he departed Cape Town he cut all bonds with the past? How can he make her accept that the process of turning himself into a different person that began when he was fifteen will be carried through remorselessly until all memory of the family and the country he left behind is extinguished? When will she see that he has grown so far away that he might as well be a stranger? (98)

Because John's mother obstinately persists in loving him, he feels that she does not understand and/or does not respect his desire to be free. In similar vein to Doris Lessing, he wishes that she were different. In *his* family romance, however, it is not the male Persian gardener whom he would like to exchange his mother for but the mother of his best friend. He tells us "He wishes his mother were like Paul's, wishes she had a life of her own outside their narrow family" (18). Exasperated as he is at his mother's narrow outlook on life and at her relentless devotion, John cannot, however, be indifferent towards her: while his feelings for her are marked by frustration, they are also marked by love and remorse. He tells us that as a child he used to be jealous of his mother's affections, that "He did not like his mother to go out [dancing], did not like the abstracted air that came over her the next day" (89). While, as a young adult, he gradually outgrows this need for his mother's attention, the feeling that he has some sort of moral obligation towards her persists. This transpires when he tells us that as much as he wants to be independent of his mother, he knows that if he were to shut her out of his life completely he would cause her such distress that he would not be able to live with himself:

> That is the trap she has built, a trap he has not yet found a way out of. If he were to cut all ties, if he were not to write at all, she would draw the worst conclusion, the worst possible; and the very thought of the grief that would pierce her at that moment makes him want to block his ears and eyes. As long as she is alive he dare not die. As long as she is alive, therefore, his life is not his own. (99)

Though John, then, wants to distance himself from his mother he knows that he cannot simply cut her out of his life completely. That this is also true for his father can be gleaned from what he experiences one day when he goes to the cinema. Sitting in a London movie theatre and watching Satyajit Ray's Apu films, the narrator is reminded of his parents and is besieged by compunction; he tells us that "In Apu's bitter, trapped mother, his engaging, feckless father he recognizes, with a pang of guilt, his own parents" (93). But these occasional "pangs of guilt" (93), uncomfortable as they are, are not enough to induce John to go home or to let his parents back into his life. Thus, while he is not indifferent towards his mother and father, and while he is occasionally even haunted by feelings of guilt, he feels his place is no longer with them, which is why he moves not only out of the house but also out of the country.[30] As I will argue in due course, however, leaving his family and his home does not in fact give him a sense of belonging. What it does, instead, is make him experience alienation on a different level and (unwittingly) exchange one type of exile for another.

Exile

The reason that the narrator is adamant to put distance between himself and his parents is that he wants to be free. Fairly towards the beginning of the book we are informed that "It was to escape the oppressiveness of family that he left home" (18). Thus one might argue that it is his desire to get away from his family which propels John to claim his freedom as an independent subject. As I have shown, finding his place in the world entails not only leaving his parental home but also his country of birth. But while his parents certainly play a part in his decision to go the London, they are by no means the only (or even the main) reason why he decides to go away. In this section I delve deeper into John's motivation for going into exile. As such, I consider how being alienated from one's culture can lead to exile both in a metaphorical and literal sense. I look, in other words, at the mechanics at work when feeling ill at ease among his own people induces the subject to leave the land of his birth and to look for a place where he believes he *will* feel at home.

In previous chapters I observed how individuals can be made to inherit their parents' past and how this can lead to alienation and malaise. But while we see something similar happening in *Youth*, the protagonist in Coetzee's text is not made to inherit the legacy of war —as was the case in both *Fugitive Pieces* and *Alfred & Emily*—but that of colonialism. That

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[30] This double bind of the maturing subject is of course one of the basic tenets of psychoanalysis. According to Jung, "in the post-pubertal period [...] the problem arises of detachment form the parents [...] The more sexuality develops, the more it drives the individual away from his family and forces him to achieve independence. But the child has become closely attached to the family by his whole previous history, and especially to the parents, so that it is often only with the greatest difficulty that the growing individual can free himself inwardly from his infantile milieu" (154).

John is unhappy to have been saddled with a colonial heritage becomes evident when he expresses his dismay at his Dutch ancestors who came to Africa in the seventeenth century and staked their claim to a land which was not theirs. Ironically, he tells us that it was really only when he moved to England that he started to realise how ludicrous colonialism actually is,[31] and that the more he thinks about how his country came into being, the less he can get his head around it:

> What had seemed perfectly natural while he still called that continent his home seems more and more preposterous from the perspective of Europe: that a handful of Hollanders should have waded ashore on Woodstock beach and claimed ownership of foreign territory they had never laid eyes on before; that their descendants should now regard that territory as theirs by birthright. (121)

Living away from home gives John the perspective to see how silly it is that the offspring of those Europeans who "[stole] the best part of Africa" (121) now believe the country rightly belongs to them. As the self-righteousness of his fellow countrymen fills him with shame, he wishes to be dissociated from them, and wants especially black people to know that he is different. A case in point is when he housesits for the Merringtons in Hampstead and has to share his newfound accommodations with their daughter's nanny from Malawi, Theodora. As Theodora evidently begrudges his presence there, John starts to wonder whether this might have to do with the fact that she sees him "as a South African, a white, an Afrikaner" (121),[32] i.e. a descendant of those who continued the tradition of colonialism by implementing apartheid. Troubled by the idea that he might be thought of as a Boer,[33] he feels the need "to make [Theodora] understand that he is not one of them, that he has quit South Africa, is resolved to put South Africa behind him for ever" (121).

Paradoxically, perhaps, while the narrator feels resentment from Theodora, from black South Africans he senses affection. Towards the start of the narrative, John relates how one day he and Paul buy a pint of milk from a young Black man making the early morning delivery to houses in a white South African suburb. Instead of resenting them for being white and privileged, the milkman exudes kindness and goodwill. The episode makes a deep impression on John and leaves him baffled, and the only conclusion he can reach is that the milkman—like other black South Africans he has encountered—is quietly diverted by his

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[31] This is ironic not only as England was one of the great colonial forces in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, but also by virtue of the fact that they took over South Africa from the Dutch in 1806.

[32] When his cousin from South Africa comes to visit him in London, John tells us "For a while they all speak English, then he relents and switches to the language of the family, to Afrikaans" (127). Thus one might assume that, even though he was brought up English, the narrator is from an Afrikaner family. While his double status is only touched on in *Youth*, it receives more attention in *Boyhood*. One of the reasons offered here for the protagonist feeling uncomfortable in the South African context is that he fits in neither with the Afrikaans nor English-speaking community. The narrator tells us that "Though his surname is Afrikaans, though his father is more Afrikaans than English, though he himself speaks Afrikaans without any English accent, he could not pass for a moment as an Afrikaner" (124). At the same time, however, he intimates that there is a difference between him and "the proper English boys, with English names and homes in the old, leafy part of Worcester" (129).

[33] The O.E.D defines "Boer" as "a member of the Dutch and Huguenot population which settled in southern Africa in the late 17th century." As it is the descendants of these settlers, the Afrikaners, who made up the bulk of the apartheid government, they are the people John wants to be least associated with.

naive efforts to make amends for the tyrannical laws of his country by showing people of colour respect:

> […] from Africans in general, even from Coloured people, he feels a curious, amused tenderness emanating: a sense that he must be a simpleton, in need of protection, if he imagines he can get by on the basis of straight looks and honourable dealings when the ground beneath his feet is soaked with blood and the vast backward depth of history with shouts of anger. (17)

The episode with the milkman reminds John of the fact that "people like Paul and himself […] are here on this earth, the earth of South Africa, on the shakiest of pretexts" (17). It also makes him realise anew the injustices that have been perpetrated against Black people in South Africa under the auspices of apartheid.[34] As intimated before, John is made even more aware of the barbarity of racial segregation when he moves to England. This has to do with the fact that through the British press he—presumably for the first time in his life—is comprehensively informed about the situation in his country.[35] He tells us that it is "with dread" (100) that he listens to English radio and that he reads English papers for news about South Africa for the reports are filled with "Horror upon horror, atrocity upon atrocity, without relief" (100). The longer he is in England the better John understands that the aim of apartheid is the systematic oppression—if not annihilation—of the black race by the white government. Accordingly he tells us that he wishes "the Russians [would] invade South Africa without delay. They should land paratroops in Pretoria, take Verwoerd and his cronies captive, line them up against a wall, and shoot them" (100). That the narrator feels exceedingly alienated from a country that is built on bloodshed and oppression is clear:

> From beginning to end the business sickens him: the [pass] laws themselves; the bully-boy police; the government, stridently defending the murderers and denouncing the dead; and the press, too frightened to come out and say what anyone with eyes in his head can see. (37)

Sickened by the laws of the land, John tells us "He is glad to be out of [South Africa]" (100) and to be in England "among the saved" (62). There is, however, another reason that he is relieved to be away from South Africa which, as he tells the man who interviews him at IBM, is that "the country is heading for revolution" (45). That South Africa is on the brink of revolt, and that this is a reason for him to leave, first becomes evident while John is still in Cape Town. He tells us "the country around him is in turmoil" and that "protests are breaking out everywhere" (37), and that his only thought is to escape while he still can. Wanting to get out of the country for his own selfish needs (instead of staying and facing the music) leads him to believe that he is no better than all the other white people who

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[34] The first four chapters of *Youth* are set in 1960s South Africa, a time when apartheid was rife and when, under the Group Areas Act, black, coloured and Indian South Africans were forcefully removed from their homes and made to resettle in remote areas outside the city parameters.

[35] Due to the censorship of the press by the apartheid government, chances are that while John was in South Africa he was not entirely privy to the political and social goings-on in his country.

do not want to be confronted with the consequences of apartheid. Therefore, though he might be critical of his colonial forefathers and though he might condemn the cruel laws of the white régime, he wonders if at bottom he is not the same as his fellow South Africans who, out of self-interest, either support the government or turn a blind eye. He finally comes to the conclusion that "He is no different. *Will the ships be sailing tomorrow?*—that is his one thought. *I must get out before it is too late!*" (39, emphasis original).

John leaves South Africa not only because he cannot abide its policy of racial segregation but also because he wants to save his own skin. In short, while his sense of (in)justice certainly precipitates his exile, his sense of self-preservation plays an equally important role in his decision to go away. There is, however, more behind his motivation to go into exile than simply wanting to get away from home. Here I would like to recall John's belief that misery, such as one might experience in exile, is needed for the artist to come into his own and produce immanent work. Thus it appears that his decision to live abroad has as much to do with his desire to fulfil his destiny as an artist as it has to do with not wanting to remain in his country of birth. In the next section I look at the ways in which living in England causes John to suffer. Subsequently I ask whether being subjected to geographic exile lives up to his expectations by stimulating his creative mind, or whether he is compelled to resort to other (and more salacious) means to be transformed into an artist.

England

When in England, the narrator declares that he is glad to be away from not only the tyranny of white South Africa but also from what he calls the country's "philistinism" (104). While South Africa to him stands for boorishness, London is a vibrant place where people are cultured and where artists are made, if not born. He admits that the city does not look inspiring from the outside, yet he (initially) believes that "London may be stony, labyrinthine, and cold, but behind its forbidding walls men and women are at work writing books, painting paintings, composing music" (41). He nonetheless concedes that this is not the only city in the world where creativity can flourish but that "There are two, perhaps three places in the world where life can be lived at its fullest intensity: London, Paris, perhaps Vienna" (41). Out of the three cities, he opts for London: this, by his own admission, is not so much because it is more inspiring than Paris or Vienna but because here "South African do not need to carry papers and [here] people speak English" (41).

In London John hopes to be "remade" and "to be rid of his old self and revealed in his new, true passionate self" (111). Being transformed into an artist, however, requires more than being domiciled in a city "where life can be lived at its fullest intensity" (41). By his own definition, in order to become a writer he needs to suffer, whether this be in the form of exile, anonymity and/or ignominy. But while in theory he is ready to accept displacement and isolation as a necessary evil in order to fulfil his destiny as an artist, in reality he is totally unprepared for the type of suffering exile involves. A case in point is that he naively believes

he will be duly integrated into English society and that he will soon be regarded as a fully fledged Londoner:

> Now here he is in the heart of London town, indistinguishable in his black uniform from any other London office-worker [...]. Soon, if his progress continues and he is careful with his vowels, no one will be sparing him a second glance. In a crowd he will pass as a Londoner, perhaps even, in due course, as an Englishman. (51)

Despite his initial optimism to be taken up by London society, John gradually realises that he will always be a foreigner there. That he starts to understand living in exile goes hand in hand with a sense of not belonging is first evinced in his observations of the city. As he becomes increasingly disheartened by London's cold and alienating exterior, he intermittently refers to it as "this huge, cold city" (57), "this alien city" (65), and "this heartless city where the cold seeps up from the very stones of the street" (104). But more than the coldheartedness of the city itself it is the cool indifference of its people which John has a problem with and which makes him feel unwelcome. In London, he says, people are "hard as stone" (113) and "cool to everyone else" (108); here "neither men nor women [meet] his gaze but, on the contrary, coolly [evade] it" (112). Further it becomes apparent to him that it is especially towards foreigners that Londoners are standoffish. Hence he posits that the reason they treat him with contempt is because they can immediately tell that he is not English:[36]

> As for him, he may dress like a Londoner, tramp to work like a Londoner, suffer the cold like a Londoner, but he has no ready quips. Not in a month of Sundays would Londoners take him for the real thing. On the contrary, Londoners recognize him at once as another of those foreigners who for daft reasons of their own choose to live where they don't belong. (102-103)

John ascribes being shunned to the fact that he is immediately recognised as one of the many undesired immigrants who have come to England in the hope of a better life. Though he never actually hears anyone making a disparaging remark about foreigners, he tells us racial intolerance is palpable and that there are clear indications that foreign nationals, especially people of colour, are not welcome on British soil:

> The people he works with are too polite to express their opinion of foreigner visitors. Nevertheless, from certain of their silences he knows he is not wanted in their country, not positively wanted. On the subject of West Indians they are silent too, but he can read the signs. NIGGER GO HOME say slogans painted on walls. NO COLOURED say notices in the windows of lodging-houses. Month by month the government tightens its immigration laws. West Indians are halted at the dockside in Liverpool, detained until they grow desperate, then shipped back to where they came from. If he is not made to feel as nakedly unwelcome as they are, it can only be because of his protective coloration: his Moss Brothers suit, his pale skin. (104)

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[36] María López has argued that there is a temporal link between the protagonist's and the writer's experiences of moving to a new country. She points out that "*Youth* was published in 2002, the year in which Coetzee moved to Australia. In its exploration of the benefits and losses of migrancy [...] and of the relation between the writer, his homeland, and a new national destination, *Youth* recalls Coetzee's own personal situation at that time and anticipates the concerns of his first novel published after his move to Australia, *Slow Man*" (239).

The narrator says that racial discrimination in England is more directed towards black than white people. But while he understands that having the "right" skin colour gives him a slightly higher status than that of other nationalities, this is not enough to make him feel "positively wanted" (104). One reason he cites for his undesirability is the fact that he is South African; he tells us "It is not a good time to be a South African in England. With great show of self-righteousness, South Africa has declared itself a republic and promptly been expelled from the British Commonwealth" (86). Another reason he gives for South Africans being unpopular in England is that they are generally thought of as backward and provincial. This comes to the fore when John goes home with Astrid (the Austrian au pair girl with whom he has a short and awkward affair) and meets the woman she works for:

> Downstairs he has tea with [Astrid] and her employer, an Englishwoman whose cool eyes take his measure and find him wanting. This is a European house, her eyes say: we don't need a graceless colonial here, and a Boer to boot. (86)

Astrid's employer leads John to believe that it is because he is from one of the colonies that he is unwanted in England. Being sized up as boorish and being dismissed outright is something he also senses from women his own age. "In England," he tells us, "girls pay no attention to him, perhaps because there still lingers about his person an air of colonial gaucherie, perhaps simply because his clothes are not right" (71). Elsewhere he posits that another reason local women spurn him is that "they are not sure who he is, what his motives might be, what he is doing in their country" (74). What he fails to observe, of course, is that it is not *their* preconceived ideas but his own that are putting a distance between them. A case in point is his decision not to get involved with Rhoda, a young English woman he meets at work. Though he would like to, John never asks Rhoda out. This, it turns out, has less to do with the fact that she is "one of the punch operators" and "somewhat thick-legged" (81) than it has to do with his own fears and prejudices. Rhoda, he says, "belongs to a foreign tribe. The barriers he would have to work his way past, to say nothing of the conventions of tribal courtship, baffle and dishearten him" (82).

The upshot of not going out with girls and not making any friends is that the longer he is in London, the lonelier John gets. It is especially at the weekends that he is made aware of the solitary existence he is leading. He tells us that to pass the time he spends his Saturdays hanging around in bookshops and libraries. Come Saturday evening, however, he can no longer put off going home but has "to give up and catch the train back to Archway station and the solitude of his room" (57). Though he is able to suppress it during the week, on weekends "the loneliness that he usually manages to keep at bay sweeps over him" (52). Not surprisingly, his sense of loneliness increases when he resigns at IBM. This is not only because he now no longer has the luxury of immersing himself in his work and forgetting how miserable he really is but also because he starts to live in complete isolation. Since he knows no one outside of work, the day he resigns is also the day he cuts himself off from

inter-subjective interaction. As his solitude increases, he becomes desperate to talk to other people and starts inventing excuses to strike up conversations with strangers, however short they might be:

> Day after day goes by when not a word passes his lips. He begins to mark them off with an *S* in his diary: days of silence.
> Outside the Underground station he bumps by mistake against a little old man selling newspapers. 'Sorry!' he says. 'Watch where you're going!' snarls the man. 'Sorry!' he repeats.
> […]. Bumping into people, saying 'Sorry!', getting abused: a ruse, a cheap way of forcing a conversation. How to trick loneliness. (113-114)

The excerpt above is indicative of the isolated existence John leads in London. Finally he has to admit that "He has not mastered London. If there is any mastering going on, it is London mastering him" (63). As exile subjects him to a suffering he is not prepared for, it is clearly a disillusioning experience. But John's disillusionment with the exilic condition is not only a matter of feeling unexpectedly lonely and out of place. It also has to do with the fact that London does not manage to fuel his artistry and hence does not live up to his expectations of being a vibrant city that turns men into artists. Because living in exile fails to inspire his creative mind, John is made to revise his opinion and admit that "misery does not feel like a purifying bath. On the contrary, it feels like a pool of dirty water. From each new bout of misery he emerges not brighter and stronger but duller and flabbier" (65).

The stunting effects of an alienated existence can be seen in his writing, for the longer John is in London the weaker and thinner his poems become. They "are wry little pieces," he avers, that "lack the energy or even the desire to explore his impasse of spirit seriously" (59). In consequence of his failure to write meaningful poetry, John considers going for "the second-best choice" (60) and trying his hand at prose. But behind this artistic regression lies more than just the condition of exile. Because he has to work to support himself, John not only has little time to write, but is also immersed in a mercantile world that seems light years removed from the world of art. Instead of being surrounded by creative people and their work, he is confined to "[an] office [where] there is nothing to rest the eye on but flat metallic surfaces" (47). Being thus distanced from a life of passion and art appears not only to stifle his creativity but also his spirit:

> Under the shadowless glare of the neon lighting, he feels his very soul to be under attack. The building, a featureless block of concrete and glass, seems to give off a gas, odourless, colourless, that finds its way into his blood and numbs him. IBM, he can swear, is killing him, turning him into a zombie. (47)

There is a final reason why John feels London fails to foster his creativity, which is that Londoners ostensibly lack appreciation for the writer and his work. The irony is palpable—of all places, it is in the city where he hopes to be transmuted into an artist that he encounters an undercurrent of antagonism to what he calls "the life of the mind" (49). The idea that

Londoners do not value art as much as they used to stems from what John reads in the English newspapers. Also the more progressive newspapers, he tells us, when "Faced with something deep and serious, […] are quick to sneer, to brush it off with a witticism" (49). At the same time that he feels "Modern England is turning out to be a disturbingly philistine country" (49), he also believes English poets do not carry the same weight that they once did. Contemporary writers seem to have lost the depth and the drive of their predecessors and are writing "dismayingly modest little poems about everyday thoughts and experiences, poems that would not have raised an eyebrow half a century ago" (58).

To summarise, John's expectations of England—viz. to offer an antidote to South African "philistinism" (104) and stimulate his creative mind—are not met. Instead, London subjects him to loneliness and suffering, a state of affairs which induces him to ask, "If this city offers no reward for misery, what is he doing here?" (97). Because he suffers without reaping the rewards, John starts to entertain the thought of going back to South Africa. This hankering for home is increased by the strong sense of attachment he has to the land of his birth. Reading memoirs written about South Africa in the nineteenth century he tells us he cannot but be enthralled—after all, it is not just any country but "his country, the country of his heart, that he is reading about" (137).

The bond John has with South Africa also comes to the fore when he writes his first short story and unwittingly places it back home. That the first complete piece he has written since coming to London takes place in South Africa makes John realise his deep-rooted (albeit undesired) sense of being bound to the place where he was born. He tells us it "disquiets him to see that he is still writing about South Africa. He would prefer to leave his South African self behind as he has left South Africa itself behind" (62). Impatiently he wonders "How much longer will he have to grit his teeth and endure before he is able to say, 'Once upon a time I used to live in South Africa but now I live in England'?" (116). Severing ties with his past, however, does not prove to be that simple for John's double bind exists precisely in the fact that he experiences both the desire and the inability to free himself from his homeland. That he is aware of the conundrum he finds himself in is evident from his assertion that "South Africa is a wound within him" (116), "an albatross around his neck" (101).

John, then, cannot escape the hold South Africa has on him; nonetheless, he is determined not to go back. This is not only because he feels out of place in a country characterised by bloodshed and boorishness (as we have seen) but also because he does not want the people back home to think of him as having failed in England. What is more, he fears that if he goes back he might never get out again:[37]

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[37] These feelings of not wanting to return home arguably reflect those of the author himself, for it was only after he was denied permanent residence in the United States, where he had been living since 1965 whilst writing his doctoral dissertation, that Coetzee went back to South Africa and that he took up a teaching position at the University of Cape Town. Considering the fact that Coetzee was left with no option but to return to South Africa—as well as the author's intimation that he and his textual namesake were subjected to similar experiences and emotions—one might postulate that Coetzee is having fun at the expense of his younger self when he has John declare that going back to South Africa is simply not an option.

> But it is inconceivable that he should reappear in Cape Town like a dog with its tail between its legs, defeated. What is there for him to do in Cape Town anyway? […]. The fact is, if he goes back to South Africa he will never escape again. He will become like the people who gather on Clifton beach in the evenings to drink wine and tell each other about the old days on Ibiza. (140)

John's sense of displacement is compounded by virtue of the fact that "He belongs to two worlds tightly sealed from each other" (130) even while not really belonging to either of them. On the matter of not belonging, Michela Canepari-Labib has intimated that the narrator's feelings of alienation echo those of Coetzee himself; accordingly, "in his autobiographical novels […] the author […] puts to paper the feelings of loneliness and marginalisation which characterised his youth" (13) While one must be careful not to conflate the writing "I" with the written "I," it is nonetheless interesting to note what Coetzee has intimated about his experiences whilst in exile, and tempting to draw parallels between his feelings and those of his main character. In *Doubling the Point* Coetzee asserts that he felt neither homesick during the time he was in Britain, nor during the years spent in America.[38] Referring to himself in the third person, Coetzee indicates, however, that while he did not miss South Africa, he also did not feel that he belonged in either of the two countries where he temporarily resided:

> Does he grow homesick for South Africa? Though he feels at home neither in Britain nor in the United States, he is not homesick, nor even particularly unhappy. He merely feels alien. (393)

As does his creator, John feels comfortable neither in the English nor the South African context. But since to his mind England is the lesser of the two evils, he decides (for the duration of the text at least) to remain in London. Of course, doing so entails not only enduring loneliness but also living without the prospect of having his creativity fostered, which, one needs to remember, is the real reason he goes to London. Because living in exile and in isolation—whether it be in his home country or in the land of his choice—[39] does not give John what he is looking for, I will presently turn to the other means by which he says he hopes to be remade as an artist. As displacement so to speak fails to do the trick, and as insanity is summarily dismissed, I ask whether the last of the remaining means of becoming an artist is more successful. That is, I consider whether sex can achieve what exile and madness cannot and provide the catalyst that will propel John into the world of art.

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[38] Coetzee wrote his Masters thesis while residing in the U.K. (1962-1965), and his doctoral dissertation during the time he spent in the U.S. (1965-1971).

[39] The narrator never explicitly refers to the time he spends in South Africa as living in exile. In this study, however, I have been using the term *exile* to refer to displacement in its broader sense, including the sense of not belonging the individual might be subjected to in his home country.

"The beloved, the destined one"[40]

The narrator says that "Sex and creativity go together, everyone says so, and he does not doubt it" (66). Yet it is not, in fact, so much that "everyone" says so as that it is that artists he looks up to say so and that they exemplify it in their lives. As celebrated artists are often known for leading lives of sexual excess, John in other words believes that *jouissance* and art are intrinsically linked. As examples of those who have had their creative energy stimulated by sex he mentions Pablo Picasso and Henry Miller; while he posits that Picasso's ardent lovemaking enabled him to produce "everlasting art" (11), he says Henry Miller's lasciviousness inspired his tales "about the Paris of the 1930s, a city of artists and women who loved artists" (29). To John, what artists say about sex confirm that it is an essential element of the writer's life and that it can make poets out of men:[41]

> As a student he was in a continual fever of lovesickness [...]. Reading the poets only heightened his fever. Through the blinding ecstasy of sex, said the poets, one is transported into brightness beyond compare, into the heart of silence; one becomes at one with the elemental forces of the universe. Though brightness beyond compare has eluded him thus far, he does not doubt for a moment that the poets are correct. (79)

The narrator believes "the blinding ecstasy of sex" (79) can transport the writer to a higher plane and make him become "at one with the elemental forces of nature" (79). The idea that sex can bring the poet closer to the realm of the divine is underlined when he posits that "In their lovemaking artists and their mistresses experience briefly, tantalizingly, the life of gods. From such lovemaking the artist returns to his work enriched and strengthened, the woman to her life transfigured" (66). It follows that in order to have a taste of the divine and be inspired in his own writing, John too will be required to have lovers:

> Having mistresses is part of an artist's life: even if he steers clear of the trap of marriage, as he will certainly do, he is going to have to find a way of living with women. Art cannot be fed on deprivation alone, on longing, loneliness. There must be intimacy, passion, love as well. (10)

Although John believes he will somehow have to include women in his life in order to experience love and desire, and so gain access to the world of art, he is reluctant to do so. However, it is not only his unwillingness to share his life with women that poses libidinal problems, but also the fact that he is put off by what he refers to as "physical ugliness" (30). Indeed, John's keen eye for observing what he deems to be the physical shortcomings of the women he meets is conspicuous: amongst others, they are described as "plain, bespectacled, solidly planted on her feet" (86), "bony [and] gaunt" (54), "small and plump" (127), and as

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[40] J.M. Coetzee, *Youth* 3

[41] On the whole, sex in *Youth* is a heterosexual affair. Although John wonders at one time whether he might be homosexual, he concludes that he cannot be because "ever since he turned sixteen he has been fascinated by the beauty of women, by their air of mysterious unattainability" (79). Further he adds that sex with a man "seems a puny activity compared with sex with a woman: quick, absent-minded, devoid of dread but also devoid of allure. There seems to be nothing at stake: nothing to lose but nothing to win either" (79).

"moon-faced [...] with mousy hair" (127). Cognisant of his own fastidiousness, John contemplates whether the aspiring artist can afford to be choosy when it comes to lovemaking or whether he is expected to have sex with every woman who comes his way, and asks, "If one is to be an artist, must one love women indiscriminately? Does an artist's life entail sleeping with anyone and everyone, in the name of life? If one is finicky about sex, is one rejecting life?" (30).

Despite being fussy about women and about sex, John does not reject lovemaking as a means of achieving artistic transformation. But instead of loving randomly, he believes that in his case it will be by making love to an elect woman that his life will change forever:

> His hope is that from the featureless crowds amidst which he moves there will emerge a woman who will respond to his glance, glide wordlessly to his side, return with him [...] to his bedsitter, make love to him, vanish into the darkness, reappear the next night [...] and so forth, thereby transforming his life [...]. (52)

John hopes that one day a woman will come seek him out from amongst the rabble and save him from a life of drudgery. This woman, he tells us, "The beloved, the destined one, will see at once through the odd and even dull exterior he presents to the fire that burns within him" (3). Having recognised the poet within, she will proceed to "unlock the hidden intensities of passion in him" (134). Through their lovemaking he will be taken to a higher realm before being brought back to the material world where he will be reborn as an artist, thereby bringing the prophecy of the poets into fulfillment:

> What of the woman who is to be his fate? [...] How much longer before she reveals herself? When she does, will he be prepared?
> What the answer is he cannot say. But if he can meet her as an equal, her, the Destined One, then their lovemaking will be unexampled, that he is sure of, an ecstasy bordering on death; and when he returns to life afterwards it will be as a new being, transformed. A flash of extinction like the touching of opposite poles, like the mating of twins; then the slow rebirth. (92-93)

The narrator says it is his fate to be sought out by the Destined One. As destiny is something which is preordained—i.e. as it does not need human intervention to be completed—he moreover feels there is nothing he can do but patiently wait until the day he is sought out by chance. Accordingly he tells us that "Until that woman arrives, until that day of destiny, he is merely passing the time" (134). By the same reasoning he claims that "he cannot will himself to write but must wait for the aid of some force from outside, a force that used to be called the Muse" (166-167). It is then also because this has not yet transpired that he has not been able to find "the right words" (166), despite having spent many months in exile:

> For nearly two years he waited and suffered in London, and destiny stayed away. [...].
> But he cannot begin writing until the moment is right, and no matter how scrupulously he prepares himself [...] the words will not come to him. Or rather, many words will come,

> but not the right words, the sentence he will recognize at once, from its weight, from its poise and balance, as *the destined one*. (165-166, my emphasis)

The way in which John's destiny as a lover and as an artist is entangled is neatly illustrated in the passage above. This, in the first place, is because he believes only once destiny calls on him will he be able to write. Significantly, he emphasises the bipartite nature of his fate by using the phrase "the destined one" (166) here *not* to refer to the woman who will transfigure him but to the words that will brand him as an artist. By virtue of the fact that he uses the same terminology to designate both the woman who is to be his fate and his work as an artist, he foregrounds the notion that his destiny is twofold and that the two parts are inextricably linked. Precisely because the one is contingent upon the other, it is imperative that he find his fortune or, better said, that his fortune find *him*:

> Everything he has done since he stepped ashore at Southampton has been a killing of time while he waits for his destiny to arrive. Destiny would not come to him in South Africa, he told himself; she would come (come like a bride!) only in London or Paris or perhaps Vienna, because only in the great cities of Europe does destiny reside. (165)

In the excerpt above the narrator reaffirms the importance of being united with his fate. Indeed, he not only says he has lived his life in the hope that destiny would seek him out but that "she would (come like a *bride*!)" (165, my emphasis). The implication is plain: the union of the bride and the groom—i.e. both the joining of the writer and his Muse, *and* the writer and his work—is imperative if a new dispensation is to come into effect and if his life as an artist is to begin.[42] Obversely, if the union does not take place and his destiny as an artist is not fulfilled, he will be condemned to a life of monotony and drudgery.[43]

Regardless of how fervently John believes his fate as an artist hinges on being united with "the Destined One" (93), this does not, however, deter him from having sex with other women. What is more, while he would like to sleep with women who are attractive and enigmatic, he declares that he does not know any and hence that he will have to content himself with other women:

> In a perfect world he would sleep only with perfect women, women of perfect femininity yet with a certain darkness at their core that will respond to his own darker self. But he knows no such women. […]. So he has to make do with other women—in fact with girls

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[42] The intertext here is of course the Book of Revelations, in which John foretells the end of days when Christ will be reunited with the church: "And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife" (*The Bible: Authorized King James Version* Rev. 21. 29). In invoking the union of the Lamb and his bride, *Youth*'s protagonist is likened to Christ. This analogy between the artist and Christ underscores, in turn, the notion of the divine status of the life writer and of the immanent quality of his work.

[43] Elisabeth Bronfen notes that "in classical Greek culture the muse […] points to a conception of the poet's gift as being dependent on an appeal to a higher power other than the self" (*Over Her Dead Body* 362). With time, however, "the vitality the muse was said to possess paled […] in Augustan Rome […] she becomes a figure for the poet's peculiarly own poetic powers, mothering genius that is innate rather than inspired […] The paradox inherent to this changed poet-muse relation is such that while the poet is portrayed as being possessed, it is he who possesses; while the poet seems dependent on the inspiration by another, he is the lover and begetter with the muse as the beloved, the begotten" (364).

> who are not yet women and may have no authentic core at all, or none to speak of [...]. (32)

Seemingly influenced by D.H. Lawrence, John believes that "only by bringing a woman to her own dark core [can] a man reach his own dark core" (68). However, at the same time that he feels himself to be under this imperative, he is also afraid of such intense lovemaking with women. This is not only because "Their ecstasies would be volcanic; he would be too puny to survive them" (68) but also because he feels "He himself [is] neither dark nor imperious, or at least his essential darkness and imperiousness [have] yet to emerge" (68).[44]

In order that "his own dark core" (68) emerge, John believes he must be united the woman destined to be his Muse. Precisely because he feels only she can unleash his creativity, John has no illusions about the fact that having sex with other women cannot bring about his transformation as an artist. But since he has one disastrous love affair after the other, he is gradually made to realise that these women are not only incapable of inspiring his creativity but that they are *detrimental* to it. A case in point is Jacqueline, for no sooner has she moved in than he wishes she were gone. Jacqueline, it turns out, suffers from a neurosis which, he says, "expresses itself [...] in sighing and feeling exhausted and sometimes crying soundlessly" (7). Things get worse, however, when Jacqueline discovers John's diary and learns that she is to him "an unspeakable burden [who is] destroying [his] peace and privacy and [his] ability to write" (8). Not surprisingly, when Jacqueline finally moves out the narrator seems relieved to be rid of "weeks of smothering intimacy" (12).

John does not appear to have learnt anything from the episode with Jacqueline, however, for there follows a row of indiscriminate love affairs that (for different reasons) consume him to such an extent that they make any writing unthinkable. In one of his most ignominious moments, John gets a young woman knocked up and then leaves her to sort out the abortion on her own. Guilty as he might profess to be feeling about not only the way he has treated the girl in question but also about destroying the life of their unborn child, this does not stop him from moving on to the next *faux pas* and resuming his affair with Caroline, "a drama student with stage ambitions" (68). Once again, the relationship is more harmful than helpful as it turns John into a jealous lover who spends his evenings impatiently waiting for Caroline to return from work. Albeit for very different reasons, the affair he has with Astrid, the Austrian au pair, similarly leaves John feeling spent. For while he is not possessive over Astrid as he is over Caroline, and while Astrid even helps to curb his loneliness, what fatigues him is the simple fact that she is *there*. He says that the one time she stays over "he lies tense and stiff

[44] Dominic Head has argued that Coetzee is making fun of the influence Lawrence has on his followers. He accordingly posits that "Coetzee then has some fun with the idea of the 'dark core' to which girls now expect to be taken, and John's nervousness about such girls [...]" (15).

all night, wakes up exhausted" (87) and that he does not stop her when she tells him she has to return to Klagenfurt.[45]

Each affair leaves John feeling more worn out and discontent than before. This leads him to postulate that "He believes in passionate love and its transfiguring power. His experience, however, is that amatory relations devour his time, exhaust him, and cripple his work" (78). Worse is to follow, however, when John sleeps with Marianne, a friend of his cousin from South Africa. For she is still a virgin, and their lovemaking disgusts him:

> He has never slept with a virgin before, has never given a thought to virginity as a physical state. Now he learns his lesson. Marianne bleeds while they are making love and goes on bleeding afterwards. […]. There is blood on the sheets, blood all over his body. They have been—the vision comes to him distastefully—wallowing in blood like pigs. (129)

In sexual experiences like the above there is little of the divine to be detected. Thus, in contrast to John's literary idols who ostensibly experience the supernal "Through the blinding ecstasy of sex" (79)—irrespective of how disgraceful the affair—John's liaisons leave him feeling spent, repulsed and artistically stunted. Critics have not failed to observe the dissonance that exists between the fantasies John has about sex on the one hand and his bona fide experiences on the other. Derek Attridge writes that "In spite of the fact that John's self-communings on the subject of women and sex are for the most part hilariously deluded, his actual encounters are often painful to read" (*Ethics of Reading* 160). Rosemary Jolly similarly comments on the ironic discrepancy between sexual reality and fantasy when she claims that "Key to the aesthetic J.M. Coetzee develops in *Youth* is precisely the juxtaposition of the ecstasy of desire with the tawdry reality of the proto-artist's attempt to fulfil those desires" (102).

Other than commenting on the gulf between John's fantastical and his real-life sexual experiences, critics have tended to see *Youth* as a partly confessional work. While Derek Attridge argues that this is because the book is "an unflinching admission of the faults of self-centeredness, cruelty, ineptitude, and callousness—most painfully evident in a series of disastrous sexual encounters" (*Ethics of Reading* 158), Dominic Head has claimed that "Coetzee contrives to depict his youthful self in as poor a light as possible. Partly, this has to do with his ongoing preoccupation with the confessional mode" (15). According to Anna Cichoń, the confessional mode is contingent on the divide between the younger and more mature self; she writes, "it is the speaker who chooses the mode of confession, and not the protagonist […]. The desire to confess, to betray secrets of long ago, to bring to light past experience and to subject the protagonist to critical scrutiny seem to belong to the mature consciousness" (63).

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[45] María López has commented on John's inability to cohabit, and has linked this to his desire to emulate his modernist forebears. She posits, "this zealous protection of his personal space [is] related to [John's] conception of his artistic project […] he emphasizes the necessary solitude and individualism of the artist, a view of literary creation that tends to be associated with the modernist period, particularly with John's masters, Eliot and Pound" (227).

But the premise for treating the text as a confessional work is that the narrator's experiences correspond exactly with those of the writer. Considering that I have shown this not to be the case, and considering that Coetzee is more a private than a public intellectual,[46] interpreting the inclusion of personal failures and sexual mishaps in the text as the desire of the mature writing subject to confess youthful secrets seems problematic.[47] Therefore, more than providing the autobiographical writer with a platform to come clean, the importance of sex lies in the way it is tied to artistry and to the disillusionment of the would-be artist. The emphasis on sex, in other words, brings to the fore the protagonist's realisation that regardless of what it might have done for the likes of Miller or Picasso, lovemaking all but awakens his own creativity. This, in the first place, is because he fails to meet (and sleep with) the woman destined to kindle in him "the sacred fire of art" (66). Concomitantly, the affairs he *does* have wear him out to such an extent that they have a negative impact on his writing. What this means on a larger scale is that the last of the three means which the narrator identifies as allowing the poet passage into the divine realm of art—"the blinding ecstasy of sex" (79)—does not succeed in transforming him either. In what follows I subsequently consider what recourse is left to the aspiring artist. More importantly, I ask whether his being disillusioned affects his ideas on what it means to become a writer and whether it has any significance for the text's understanding of the life writing genre.

Ganapathy

Whether by affliction, insanity or sex, the idea is put forward that the subject must be tested and transfigured if he is to reemerge as a (life writing) artist. One by one, however, the narrator disqualifies these options as the means by which his own metamorphosis will be achieved. Already at the beginning does he tell us that madness will never do the trick. As concerns sex and suffering, however, it is only after spending two years in exile that he realises they will not unleash his artistry either. That is, he comes to see that his initial reasoning is faulty and that he has been labouring under a delusion all along:

> *Experience*. That is the word he would like to fall back on to justify himself to himself. The artist must taste all experience, from the noblest to the most degraded. Just as it is the artist's destiny to experience the most supreme creative joy, so he must be prepared to take upon himself all in life that is miserable, squalid, ignominious. It was in the name of experience that he underwent London—the dead days of IBM, the icy winter of 1962, one

[46] Coetzee's aversion to public gatherings is well-known. Peter D. McDonald writes that Coetzee "has shown little enthusiasm for the razzmatazz of celebrity authorship: he failed to turn op to collect either of his Booker Prizes and has always been a testy award-winner on principle […] When he won the Nobel in 2003 […] he noted various gaps in the list of prizes given […] and added that the literature prize 'belongs to days when a writer could still be thought of as […] a sage […].' This idea is 'pretty much dead today' […] 'I would certainly feel very uncomfortable in the role'" (24).

[47] Pieter Vermeulen has similarly argued that *Youth* is not a confessional work, though for different reasons than the ones presented above. Vermeulen posits that the "double dismissal of the models of experience-as-enrichment and of the confessed insight into the vanity of experience […] means that Coetzee's books, by the very fact that they still appear as autobiographies, occupy a third autobiographical position different from both. They *remain* as works of prose" (57, emphasis original).

> humiliating affair after another: stages in the poet's life, all of them, in the testing of his soul. […].
> It is a justification that does not for a moment convince him. It is sophistry, that is all, contemptible sophistry. (164, emphasis original)

As he comes to new insights, John is made to revise his naive beliefs of what it means to become an artist.[48] Since the text, then, focuses on the failings of the protagonist and on his disillusionments, it invokes works by respectively Tolstoy and Conrad *not only* on the grounds of its title.[49] Chris Ackerley has pointed out that, much like Tolstoy's autobiographical work of the same name,[50] Coetzee's *Youth* "presents the protagonist's earlier self in a searching and largely unfavorable light;" also, in contrast to Conrad's eponymous short story, the memoir "does not romanticize the formative experiences, instead reworking these so as to puncture the illusions and acknowledge the ambivalence embedded in the colonial experience" (24). But there is another level of irony to be detected in John's development from believer to skeptic, especially if one considers the similarities between his life and that of his creator, as well as the likelihood that he (John) will go on to become an artist after all.[51] For while suffering and sex do not give the *protagonist* the kickstart he was hoping for, it does (retrospectively) give the *author* material to write about. Hence we might say that, in similar fashion to Doris Lessing, adversity inspires the writer and aids the writing process even while this might not be apparent to the young narrator.

Because John does not have the advantage of seeing things from a looking-back perspective, he believes his experiences in England have not managed to fuel his artistry. Subsequently he declares he has been waiting in vain for destiny to seek him out and transform him. This leads him to revise his belief that his succeeding hinges on "the Destined One" (93) finding him and to posit, instead, that the only way in which he will ever be able to fulfil his destiny—both as a lover and as a writer—is if he occasions things to happen:

> He is well aware that his failure as a writer and his failure as a lover are so closely parallel that they might as well be the same thing. He is the man, the poet, the maker, the active principle, and the man is not supposed to wait for the woman's approach. On the contrary, it is the woman who is supposed to wait for the man. The woman is the one who sleeps until aroused by the prince's kiss; the woman is the bud that unfolds under the

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[48] Dominic Head has argued that "*Youth* gently punctures the artistic pretensions of Coetzee as a 'youth'" (7). Although *Youth* certainly addresses a young man's disillusionment with what it means to become an artist, it seems naive of Head to categorically equate the writer with the protagonist.

[49] While the book's title invokes autobiographical texts by Conrad and Tolstoy, its subtitle recalls, amongst others, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary: Moeurs de province* (Attwell, "Life and Times of Elizabeth Costello" 32), George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* and Balzac's *Scenes from Provincial Life* from his *La Comédie humaine* (Cichoń 65; Kossew 12) as well as to the three-part series of memoirs by William Cooper (Kossew 12).

[50] As Tolstoy's autobiographical books comprise *Childhood* (1852), *Boyhood* (1854) and *Youth* (1856), two of his works are in fact invoked in Coetzee's trilogy.

[51] There are arguably more similarities than differences between Coetzee's life and that of his protagonist, a fact which suggests that John finally does reach artistic immanence. That is to say, as the author and his main character's lives overlap and as they share certain key experiences, chances are that they also have similar careers, which would mean that John achieves his artistic ambitions after all. I return to the idea that John goes on to become a mouthpiece for the gods later in the chapter.

> caress of the sun's rays. Unless he wills himself to act, nothing will happen, in love or in art. (166)

John says "in his heart of heart he knows destiny will not visit him unless he makes her do so. He has to sit down and write, that is the only way" (166). Yet he maintains this is precisely what he is unable to do, seemingly because he fears being a failure:

> But the most brutal way is to say that he is afraid: afraid of writing, afraid of women. He may pull faces at the poems he reads in *Ambit* and *Agenda*, but at least they are there, in print, in the world. How is he to know that the men who wrote them did not spend years squirming as fastidiously as he in front of the blank page? They squirmed, but then finally they pulled themselves together and wrote as best they could what had to be written, and mailed it out, and suffered the humiliation of rejection or the equal humiliation of seeing their effusions in cold print, in all their poverty. [...].
> What is wrong with him is that he is not prepared to fail. [...]. Ludicrous! Childish! He does not have to be told so: he can see it for himself. Nevertheless. Nevertheless he cannot do it. Not today. Perhaps tomorrow. Perhaps tomorrow he will be in the mood, have the courage. (167)

The narrator declares that it is because he does not want to suffer the embarrassment of failing that he lacks the nerve to send his work out into the world. In fact, so important is it to him not to be mocked for his artistic ambitions that he keeps them to himself. That John is aware of his own cowardliness in hiding his artistic aspirations comes to the fore when he resigns at IBM. Instead of telling the truth—that he is leaving in order to concentrate on his writing—he tells them it is because he has not made any friends at work. Though he realises how absurd this must sound, he believes it is better than the truth coming out; he tells us, "at least he is not saying, 'I am leaving IBM in order to become a poet.' That secret, at least, is still his own" (109).

While he might not be prepared for it (yet), John understands that if he is to fulfil his artistic destiny he will have to make his secret known and expose himself to the world sooner or later. He realises that he will have to stop being protective of his writing, and that he will have to acquire "a kind of stupid, insensitive doggedness, as lover, as writer, together with a readiness to fail and fail again" (167). With the above in mind I want to argue that what we see during the course of the narrative, then, is not so much John's transformation into an artist as his attaining new insights into what it will take for him to become one. Put another way, while John reaches a mature understanding of what his fate as an artist entails, he does not actually achieve full command of the art of writing. Hence, while it certainly contains aspects of the genre, *Youth*, as Pieter Vermeulen has pointed out, "is not a straightforward *Kunstlerroman*" (56).[52]

As I have insisted on the similarities between autobiographical texts produced during modernism and those written in the contemporary period, it is perhaps more interesting to take note of the way in which the protagonist comes to an acceptance of his duty as a writer

[52] According to Abrams, "[an] important subtype of the Bildungsroman is the Künstlerroman ("artist-novel") which represents the growth of a novelist or other artist into the stage of maturity that signalizes the recognition of artistic destiny and mastery of artistic craft" (120).

(whether he sees it through or not) than to consider the extent to which the text might be classified as a Künstlerroman. In this respect, *Youth* might be said to invoke modernist autobiography, and especially the work of James Joyce, as it sees the artist reach an understanding of his fate by having an epiphany as a result of an everyday experience.[53] For it is neither a life of exile nor the love of a beautiful woman that brings *Youth's* narrator to new insights, but the unlikely character of his Indian associate at IBM, Ganapathy. It is foremost because John identifies so closely with Ganapathy that the latter acts like a mirror and allows John to see his own timidity reflected back at him: John tells us that he and Ganapathy are very much in the same boat as they are both foreigners from erstwhile colonies who have come to England in the hope of a better life. They further share similarities in the type of the relationship they have with their mothers and in their desire to be independent subjects. Perceptively John tells us that "Like himself, Ganapathy is a spoiled, clever boy. Like himself, Ganapathy has run away from his mother and the smothering ease she offers" (147). He adds, however, that now that Ganapathy has managed to escape from home, he is unwilling to claim his freedom. This at least is the conclusion he comes to when he goes to look in on Ganapathy after he stays away from work for days on end without any explanation, and finds him looking emaciated and living in squalor in the council block apartment he is renting:

> Ganapathy is as tiny as a sparrow, with not a spare ounce of flesh. His face is gaunt. If he is not ill, he is at least starving. Behold: in Bracknell, in the heart of the Home Counties, a man is starving because he is too incompetent to feed himself.
> […].
> Absurd, but perhaps that is what Ganapathy wants: to have his food brought to him. […]. But in Ganapathy's case, running away seems to have used up all his energy. Now he is waiting to be rescued. He wants his mother, or someone like her, to come and save him. Otherwise he will simply waste away and die, in his flat full of garbage. (147)

Seeing (Gan)apathy apathetic like this leads John to postulate that he is waiting for someone—presumably his mother—to come and deliver him from suffering. This makes John think of his own life and of the way he has been waiting for his artistry to be released. Subsequently he is brought to realise that if he does not stop waiting for destiny to rescue him from a life of drudgery, if he does not "[will] himself to act" (166), he will end up just like Ganapathy. He is made to understand, in other words, that if he declines his interpellation as

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[53] In *The Modernism Handbook*, Philip Tew writes that "Joyce uses epiphany as a literary device in his writing such as in the stories as in the *Dubliners* (1914) and in the novel *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* (1916), where fundamental meaning is acquired from a fragment of experience, or a character suddenly revises their view of themselves or their social condition, radically changing their world-view" (202). The idea that *Youth* comes out of the tradition of modernist autobiography writing is not only evinced by the similarities it shares with *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* but also finds confirmation in what the author himself has said. In "Homage" Coetzee talks about the literary influences on his writing and indicates that his role models included "Rilke and Musil, Pound and Faulkner, Ford and Beckett" (7). While Coetzee, then, was largely influenced by modernist writers, Derek Attridge has pointed out that "Because of its use of nonrealistic or antirealist devices, its allusiveness, and its metafictional proclivities, Coetzee's fiction is often adduced as an example of 'postmodernism'" (*Ethics of Reading* 2). Attridge goes on to argue, however, that Coetzee's oeuvre is more representative of "late modernism" (a classification which he adds in a footnote was suggested by David Attwell) than it is of postmodernism since it "follows on from Kafka and Beckett, not Pynchon and Barth" (2).

an artist he too will slowly "waste away and die" (147)—to be sure, not of malnutrition but of intellectual atrophy and mental fatigue:

> He and Ganapathy are two sides of the same coin: Ganapathy starving not because he is cut off from Mother India but because he doesn't eat properly, because despite his M.Sc. in computer science he doesn't know about vitamins and minerals and amino acids; and he locked into an attenuating endgame, playing himself, with each move, further into a corner and into defeat. One of these days the ambulance men will call at Ganapathy's flat and bring him out on a stretcher with a sheet over his face. When they have fetched Ganapathy they might as well come and fetch him too. (168-169)

On the whole, literary critics have interpreted these final words of the text either as a negative portrayal of life and/or the acceptance of death. While María López has claimed that the last paragraph is "unequivocal in its confirmation of the failure and solitude of the character" (234), Derek Attridge has intimated that the end is only partly redeemed by the fact that the informed reader knows its author went on to achieve success: "Toward the end of the book […] there are hints at what is to come, discernible only by those who are familiar with Coetzee's personal history […] the possibility of gaining a fellowship at an American university (151-152) can be understood as bearing fruit just beyond the (mordantly defeatist) final words of *Youth*" (*Ethics of Reading* 158). Alternatively, Chris Danta has argued that "what Coetzee gives us at the end of *Youth* is the truly grim prospect of two un-illuminated deaths for the price of one" ("The Melancholy Ape" 130). While these ideas are plausible, Gillian Dooley's contention that "[Coetzee's] endings inevitably color all that comes before" (5) appears to be more illuminating. For *Youth*'s concluding sentences shed light precisely by putting into perspective, for the protagonist but also for the reader, preceding events. It makes him and us realise that what is at stake is "Not a man treading water but, precisely, a *youth* treading water" (Coetzee qtd. in Attwell, "*Autre*-biography" 216, emphasis original). Thus what seems to be at the heart of the text is John's realisation that he needs to act like a mature subject if he wants to become an artist. Seen in this light, the ending, then, is not so much a celebration of death or an acceptance of defeat as it is a Descartian moment of self-recognition.

The fact that the protagonist experiences a moment of self-discovery and that he is made to reexamine his youthful ideas on what it means to become an artist raises important issues concerning the life writer's manifesto and the nature of autobiography as presented in the text. Indeed, the fact that John comes to new insights of what it means to fulfil one's artistic ambitions begs the question whether he also changes his mind about the autobiographer and about autobiography writing. That is to say, as the diarist-narrator sheds his romanticised illusion of what it takes to become an artist, does this mean that the rest of his beliefs—*nota bene* that life writing is a work of art and subsequently immanent in intent—are also revised and even rescinded?

But while the ending invites one to reconsider the manifesto and to ask whether the ironic depiction of his younger self's beliefs also implies a revision of the narrator's ideas about

what it means to write a life, there does not appear to be any textual evidence to suggest that this is indeed the case. As there is no indication that John has a change of heart about the importance of the life writer and his work, i.e. as the story ends without any reevaluation of the manifesto, one cannot assume that he reverses his opinion in this respect. On the contrary, I would like to move in the opposite direction and claim that the ending *reinforces* the notion that, if art is to be produced at all, it is imperative that the artist believe he or she is destined to become a mouthpiece for the gods. I, then, want to argue that it is precisely by virtue of the aspiring life writer's faith in his or her own immanence—that is, in the conviction that he or she is one of the chosen elite who have a divine duty to perform—that works of art are born in the first place, and that the text at hand is a case in point. For is it not foremost John's belief that he is to become "a conduit for the great universal force that has no name" (117) that drives the narrative forward to the final moment of recognition? Is it not his determination to follow in the footsteps of "the great masters" (66) that makes him go to London and makes him suffer in exile and in love, while waiting for his Muse to arrive? Is it not (also) because he becomes increasingly desperate to fulfil his artistic ambitions as time goes by that he finally has to admit to himself that it is his own lethargy and cowardliness which have kept him from achieving these aims? Indeed, as it his desire to be a channel for higher forces that sets in motion the entire text, is it not feasible that the life narrative might never have been written were it not for the belief that the life writing artist is special and that his work is divine?[54]

Reflection

Youth makes a claim for not belonging—both in respect of the autobiographical text and of the autobiographical subject. At the same time that it sees life narratives as wavering between the material and immaterial world, as well as between fact and fiction, the life-writing subject is portrayed as mediating not only between concrete and fictionalized versions of the self but also between worldly and otherworldly domains. On the one hand, this moving back and forth is effected by the notion that autobiography writing necessitates the conflation of biographical fact with fiction. On the other, it is predicated on the self's desire to become a mouthpiece for the gods and on his belief that it is only once the transition has been made from earthbound man to divinely inspired (life writing) artist that the subject can produce meaningful works and become a channel for a higher force.

Conveying and underlining the young self's sense of not belonging is not only a distinctive feature of the memoir but seems to be the whole point of the autobiographical exercise; put another way, insofar as it gives us insight into the internal struggles of the maturing subject, the text shows us "precisely, a *youth* treading water" (Coetzee qtd. in Attwell, "*Autre-*

[54] This line of thinking finds support in "Homage" in which Coetzee writes that "[one's] late teens and early twenties [is] a time of life when one begins, almost inevitably, to define or at least demarcate an identity for oneself as one pursues, more or less purposefully, certain of the options opened up by youthful fantasy […]" (5).

biography" 216, emphasis original). In light of the epiphanic ending in which this is thematised, it would further appear that critics are misled in arguing that the final paragraphs are fatalistic and morose. For if the ending had been conclusive rather than speculative—that is, if the story had ended not with an anagnorisis but in the knowledge that John finally manages to fulfil his artistic ambitions—it would have detracted from the text's telos which, as Coetzee has intimated himself, is that of "getting beyond youth" (Coetzee qtd. in Attwell, "*Autre*-biography" 216).

But though it is true that *Youth* succeeds in reaching its autobiographical teleology, it is also true that it is the second book in a series of three, and that it can be understood in a wider context. By virtue of the fact that it was published as part of a trilogy, the protagonist of the three works can namely be said to share an identity. The implication of this is that especially the sequel might offer clues as to the life John leads after realising at the end of *Youth* what it is he needs to do if he wants to follow in the footsteps of Western literary masters. *Summertime* then also gives us some indication of how John's literary future pans out: it tells us that in his lifetime John Coetzee (now deceased) became a celebrated writer who amongst others authored *In the Heart of the Country*, *Dusklands* and *Disgrace*. Consequently we infer that the fumbling young poet of *Youth* goes on to achieve writerly success after all, thereby managing the transition from man to artist.

But, as always with Coetzee, things are more complicated than what is initially apparent. For while details about the protagonist's literary status in *Summertime* seems to satisfy any curiosity aroused by the final paragraphs of *Youth*, the sequel raises the question whether John ever became a *true* artist. Indeed, while the subject is said to have written prolifically during his lifetime, the idea is expressed that this does not mean he was one of literature's great figures. This, at least, seems to be the general opinion of the women interviewed by the British biographer who is investigating the life of Coetzee. Thus Julia (the first to be asked about her relationship with the deceased writer) asserts not to have been blown away by *Dusklands;* this not only because "the passion behind it is obscure" (58) but also because it has "[no] proper heroes and heroines, [no] characters you can admire" (56). More severe in her criticism of Coetzee, however, is the Brazilian-born Adriana: while John might have been a good writer, she declares him not to have been masterly; "a talent for words," she tells the biographer, "is not enough if you want to be a great writer. You also have to be a great man. And he was not a great man" (195).

Summertime leaves it open whether John Coetzee ever was a true artist. For although the women characters in the story are clearly not taken with his work, the frame narrative suggest he is an important enough figure to have his life researched and written about. Based on what one is told on the diegetic level, one then cannot say whether or not *Youth*'s protagonist achieves his aims of becoming a mouthpiece for the gods in a way reminiscent of his literary forebears. However, if one approaches the text from another angle, one might postulate that John is in fact granted otherworldly status for he foretells his own death. In

this respect, Chris Danta has postulated that by killing off the author's second self, Coetzee's text works on two levels: "[it points] not just to the author becoming an ordinary (or even less-than-ordinary) man but also to the author opening his poet-self to some higher force in order to begin to speak vatically" ("Janus Face" xvii). But there is something more to be added here: writing posthumously about his own life and death means not only that the implied author is speaking prophetically and acting as a channel for divine forces, but also that he is victorious over death. *Summertime*, in other words, presupposes that the deceased subject has come back to earth in order to complete the final installment in his autobiographical trilogy. Looked at this way, I want to argue that the young narrator in *Youth* finally does become a literary figure of note, for he lives *on*. This is moreover a claim I would like to might make for the text; indeed, whether by dint of the fact that it speaks to us from on high or that it reveals the truth of the subject, *Youth* lives on in our minds. We carry it with us so that we might bring it forth whenever we need to remind ourselves of the delicate yet powerful nature of the life writing genre and of what it might effect if it remains true to its immanent aims.

Conclusion

> [...] my narrative must become an account of my own presence, *id est*, an autobiography, that most evasive and self-indulgent of forms.
>
> —A.S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*

At the dawn of the new millennium, right in the middle of the memoir boom that marked the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, A.S. Byatt brought out a new novel. An exercise in auto/biographical writing, *The Biographer's Tale* tells the story of scholar Phineas G. Nanson who one day decides that he has had enough of a postmodern analysis of literature. Prompted by Professor Ormerod Goode, Nanson resolves to write a book about a biographer by the name of Scholes Destry-Scholes. Goode recommends that Nanson start with Destry-Scholes's biographical "masterpiece" (5). This sets in motion a chain of events that sees Nanson discovering unknown texts by the biographer. Ironically, while Destry-Scholes's work does not yield much insight about the life writer himself, it does contain some "new" data on three actual persons. As the narrator subsequently goes on to share this with the reader, it starts to look as if Destry-Scholes's text might not be at the heart of Nanson's tale. Instead, it appears that his investigation is part of an intricate framework which allows Nanson (and indeed Byatt) to present partly real and partly fictional facts about historical worthies, including Henrik Ibsen, Carl Linnaeus and Francis Galton.

But, Nanson informs us, if we were thinking that the telos is to talk about notable writers (whether fictional or real) we have been duped—for the wool that has been pulled over our eyes is that the story really concerns the extradiegetic narrator, and that the "biography" is a ruse allowing him to write about himself:[1]

> I have nearly reached the end of this story. [...]. I have admitted I am writing a story, a story which in a haphazard (aleatory) way has become a first-person story, and, from being a story of a search told in the first person, has become, I have to recognise—a first-person story proper, an autobiography. I detest autobiography. Slippery, unreliable, and worse, imprecise. [...]. Autobiography, as I write, is fashionable. The 'flavour of the moment'. [...]. Everyone is writing his or her 'memoir'. They resemble each other like Galton's photographs, or eighteenth-century portraits as perceived by Ibsen. They are rather repulsive. (249-250)

Nanson's confession brings to the fore the way in which *The Biographer's Tale* picks up on claims made in this thesis. That is to say, by wavering between the biographical *he* and the

[1] Given that the above quotation is in the first person, and given that it talks about the nature of the very text in which it appears, it might be argued that the story really is about Byatt and that the ideas presented above reflect that of the implied (if not flesh-and-blood) author.

autobiographical *I* on the one hand, and between fact and fiction on the other, it manages to perform the wily nature of the life writing genre. Ironically, it is precisely this malleable characteristic of autobiography that Nanson ostensibly finds offensive. In his diatribe on the practice of writing life narratives quoted above, Nanson professes to "detest" (250) autobiography because "Everyone is writing his or her 'memoir'" (25) and because it is "Slippery, unreliable, and worse, imprecise" (250). Clearly, Nanson is not the only one to think along these lines; a number of life writing theorists, as we have seen, have similarly remarked on the shiftiness of the autobiographical genre. A case in point is Shirley Geok-lin Lim, who convincingly argues that autobiography is

> a genre that keeps transforming its modus operandi, its status and its very name, shifting its shape with each change in speaking circumstances, adopting the devices and strategies of other seemingly more literary genres like the novel and the poem, appropriating the materials of different disciplines [...]. It is difficult to reconcile such a nimble, flexible, enterprising, entrepreneurial, ethically challenged, un-law-abiding genre with the rigors, circumscriptions, demands and regulations that rule in academia. (303)

Like many a theorist before her, and like Byatt's protagonist, Geok-lin comments on the inability to pin down and, by extension, emplace autobiography. However, like them, she too fails to bring its inconclusiveness in relation with displacement and not-belonging—a major oversight on the part of literary theory in my eyes. To correct this wrong, I have maintained throughout that autobiography is not only crafty by nature but inherently *exilic*, and that contemporary autobiography's exploitation thereof should not only "[be] rationalized as a transgressive feature of postmodernist pastiche" (Geok-lin 304), but as an attempt at mirroring the condition of the postmodern subject. I have argued, in other words, that by virtue of the way in which they have been appropriated, these narratives have become unclassifiable and thus displaced in themselves. In consequence, they reflect the individual's composite sense of alienation, which might entail their being excluded from their land, their community, their language and their family as well as from the material world and from life itself. The way in which autobiography's form and content mirror each other is, moreover, not restricted to the five narratives that make up this work but can also be seen in the text in hand. *The Biographer's Tale*, that is, illustrates the synthesis that can be achieved when both story and subject fail to belong. For the alienation Nanson suffers, amongst others on account of his disillusionment with academia and the passing of his mother, is supported by a text which is neither completely factual nor fictional and which is not at home in the canon of novel, biography or autobiography writing.

Byatt's book, then, shares common features with other experimental autobiographical works produced around the turn of the century and discussed in this thesis—it not only self-referentially comments on the homelessness of the autobiographical genre but employs this very characteristic to enact the subject's sense of dislocation. There is, however, a fundamental difference: whereas *The Biographer's Tale* suggests that autobiography is a

lesser genre because it is "Slippery, unreliable, and worse, imprecise" (250), the texts looked at before seem to be saying the contrary, to wit that it is because of autobiography's ability for unreliability that some truth can be detected. Thus *Angela's Ashes*, by dint of designating itself "A Memoir of a Childhood," asserts that a life narrative might very well fictionalise certain events. This is because memoir is not a factual portrayal of our lives but an account of the way we remember the past, and that it is in the sincere rendition of that memory that the truth can be found. In related vein, the life writer's manifesto in *Youth* upholds the idea that because we can never know the ultimate truth about our selves, we inevitably make up some of our past. This, however, does not mean that autobiographical texts are completely truth-less; indeed, as it contains some biographical accuracies about Coetzee's life, but also because it shows us the young John's alienation and his striving for maturity, *Youth* by any account must be seen as containing traces of the truth.

That fiction allows some truth to transpire also came to the fore in *Alfred & Emily*. For the text suggests that bare fact omits essential details about the individual, and that a certain amount of fictionalisation is indispensable if the core of the person is to be relayed. At the same time that it enabled authors to bring across the quintessence of the auto/biographical subject, I argued that including fiction in life writing is sometimes seen as having the potential to redeem individuals. Indeed, both *Alfred & Emily* and *Fugitive Pieces* suggested that history could be eliminated by means of the written word, and that this could give subjects—autobiographical and otherwise—a new existence. In *Too Close to the Bone* the fluidity of the autobiographical genre was similarly hailed as having healing properties. Here the notion was put forward that because autobiography is malleable, and because it allows the life writer to move between the invented and the real, memoirists could start to disentangle the past and so come to understand what is at the heart of their displacement and dis-ease.

Of course, it is not only life writers who have called attention to the uses of including fiction in autobiography. As I showed in the Introduction, literary theorists have duly written on the ways in which autobiography might achieve generic ambiguity and how this might effect the text and its truth value. However, little has been said about the impact conflating genres has on the reader and about how this ties in with the question of exile. It was then also into this gap in autobiography theory where my own study inserted itself. To this end, I maintained that readers are deprived of orientation and left feeling ill at ease when they are confronted with a life narrative that they cannot categorically emplace, and that their ensuing feelings of malaise are not unlike those the protagonists are subjected to. In such cases, the text becomes a vehicle which conveys the narrated self's sense of displacement to the reader. At the same time, however, it was pointed out that readers need not always be passive recipients of the life writer's message; to be sure, they can also become active participants in the autobiographical chain of communication when they are required to help the autobiographer identify those lacunae that he or she—by virtue of their proximity to the text

and the events described there—cannot. It is only when readers cannot get their message back to the writer, or when writers do not (necessarily) want readers to notice these gaps, that two-way autobiographical communication breaks down.

This thesis enlarges upon the elusiveness of the autobiographical genre by advocating its fundamentally exilic properties: it not only sees autobiography as vacillating between fact and fiction and between different text types, but also as moving from the writer to the reader and (partly) back again, and as being suspended between the material and immaterial world. Because the current study rethinks autobiography's position in the literary world, it pushes it out of the comfort zone it has come to occupy in recent years, and thus manages to send it into exile once more. This, moreover, is a process that will ostensibly never end. To return a final time to Byatt's text, Phineas G. Nanson, displeased with what turned out to be a venture into writing his own life narrative, avows

> I am going to stop writing this story. The problem is I have become addicted to writing—that is, to setting down the English language, myself, in arrangements chosen by me, for—let it be admitted—pleasure. (250)

In similar fashion to the narrator in *Alfred & Emily* and in *Youth*, Nanson finds autobiography addictive for it allows him to gratify his creative impulse. In this he is not alone since writing one's life, as he points out himself, is "The 'flavour of the moment [...]'" (250). While I have shown that this is indeed the case, I have also argued that the contemporary period's fascination and experimentation with the autobiographical genre is not an entirely new phenomenon but that it has its roots in modernism. This leads me to postulate that the reason autobiography has been attractive to artists then and now is that, more than any other genre, it is a form that invites the transgression of boundaries. At the same time, it allows writers to see their selves taking shape on the page in front of them and to gratify their artistic and writerly needs. Because these qualities are inherent to the autobiographical genre, one might venture a prediction and posit that it will never lose its appeal to writers. Artists, that is, will keep returning to autobiography and will continue to appropriate its exilic nature in new and inventive ways. Thus it will always be in flux, always on the move. Concomitantly—and consequentially—literary theorists will never stop writing about self-writing but keep expanding on autobiography's inherent homelessness so that, in short, it will continue to live a life in exile.

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Curriculum Vitae

Personal details

Name	Elizabeth Kollmann
Date of birth	2 November 1973
Place of birth	Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Education

2014	PhD: English Literature *Autobiography, A Life in Exile: A Study of Homelessness in Contemporary Life Narrative* - University of Zurich
2005	Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, TESOL - Trinity College London
2002	Magister Artium: English Literature *Jane Austen Re-visited: A Feminist Evaluation of the Longevity and Relevance of the Austen oeuvre* - University of Port Elizabeth
1999	Baccalaureus Honores: English - University of Port Elizabeth
1995	Higher Diploma in Education - University of Port Elizabeth
1994	Baccalaureus Artium - University of Port Elizabeth

Employment

09.2013 – present	University of Zurich, Zurich Temporary Instructor in English Literature
08.2009 – present	Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW), Winterthur Lecturer in English
02.2015 – 12.2015	University of Zurich, Zurich Coordinator of the Doctoral Programme in English and American Literary Studies
09.2008 – 06.2009	Bern University of Applied Sciences (SHL), Bern Instructor in English
01.2008 – 12.2009	Self-employed, Zurich English teacher
10.2002 – 12.2007	inlingua Sprachschule, Zurich English teacher
04.2002 – 12.2002	Dialogica Sprachschule, Zurich English teacher
01.2000 – 12.2000	Ed-U-College, Port Elizabeth English teacher
01.1997 – 04.1998	Drake International, Port Elizabeth Personnel consultant
01.1996 – 12.1996	Framesby High School, Port Elizabeth High school teacher